



National Security Guard (NSG) commandos reenact a counterterrorism operation during their 33rd NSG Raising Day celebration on 16 October 2017 in Gurgaon, India. PHOTO BY RAJ K RAJ/HINDUSTAN TIMES/NEWSCOM

Behind headlines, social media, and fear-mongering lies an ISIS threat not of ideology, but rather opportunity. ISIS is a maestro at maximizing political instability and discontent, parlaying them into new potential strongholds and followers. In this monograph, Namrata Goswami expertly unmasks this underground version of ISIS, and with it, uncovers vulnerabilities to previously untapped ISIS targets in Bangladesh, Burma, India, and Indonesia. This monograph provides a much needed fact-based perspective to explain the success of ISIS in both spreading its ideology and recruitment base. Drawing upon historical examples and parallels, the author describes a movement that is very strategic in its emphases. Even existing scholars in the region are apt to find new and invaluable insights on where sociological, cultural, and political variables of this region intersect with ISIS opportunity.

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ISIS 2.0: Opportunities and Vulnerabilities

Goswami



JOINT SPECIAL OPERATIONS UNIVERSITY



## ***ISIS 2.0: South and Southeast Asia Opportunities and Vulnerabilities***

Namrata Goswami

with contributions from Robert A. Norton and Greg S. Weaver

JSOU Report 18-6



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*ISIS 2.0: South and  
Southeast Asia  
Opportunities and  
Vulnerabilities*

*Namrata Goswami  
with contributions from  
Robert A. Norton and Greg S. Weaver*

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**On the cover.** Iraqi soldiers from the 40th Brigade conduct a night, live-fire exercise at the Besmaya Range Complex in Iraq, on 2 April 2018 as part of Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve. U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY SPC ANTONIO LEWIS

**Back cover.** On 16 October 2017, National Security Guard (NSG) commandos reenacted a counterterrorism operation during their 33rd NSG Raising Day celebration at the Manesar campus in Gurgaon, India. The NSG, popularly known as the "Black Cats," was formed in 1984 to combat terrorist activities, specifically to protect states against internal disturbances. PHOTO BY RAJ K RAJ/ HINDUSTAN TIMES/ NEWS.COM

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## From the Director

The goal of good research is to find not what is, but what can be.

*ISIS 2.0—South and Southeast Asia Opportunities and Vulnerabilities* by Namrata Goswami, Robert Norton, and Greg Weaver presents a startling wake-up call to the potential for further Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) expansion into the seemingly quiet confines of Bangladesh, Burma, India, and Indonesia. Through a research-driven approach to ISIS culture, recruitment, and narratives, the author reasons that current events in Syria and Iraq will almost inevitably spread to these countries. Drawing from detailed analyses obtained during in-person visits, interviews, and research on Bangladesh, Burma, India, and Indonesia, this monograph points to trends and insights most vital to the special operations community.

This unique look into the ISIS threat—most importantly how to identify and address it—stands as a must read for scholars and practitioners focused on South and Southeast Asia, and those searching for a better understanding of how and why transnational threat groups form and morph.

Francis X. Reidy  
Interim Director, Center for Strategic Studies



# Foreword

Behind headlines, social media, and fear-mongering lies an Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) threat not of ideology, but rather opportunity. This ISIS is a maestro at maximizing political instability and discontent, parlaying them into new potential strongholds and followers.

In this monograph, Namrata Goswami expertly unmasks this underground version of ISIS, and with it, uncovers vulnerabilities to previously untapped ISIS targets in Bangladesh, Burma, India, and Indonesia. While these four states appear largely ignored by ISIS as potential areas for exploitation, the author expertly argues this oversight could afford the organization easy expansion into critical spaces within South and South East Asia.

Perhaps most importantly, this monograph provides a much needed fact-based perspective to explain the success of ISIS in both spreading its ideology and recruitment base. Drawing upon historical examples and parallels, the author argues for a movement very strategic in its emphases, likewise targets it chooses to both attack and draw followers from. Along these lines, Bangladesh, Burma, India, and Indonesia emerge as the next potential stops for ISIS as it continues its quest for influence and legitimacy. Throughout, the authors deliberately link ISIS events and leadership in Syria and Iraq back to these four countries.

Equally significant, Goswami and colleagues break down economic and social nuances behind ISIS targets, specifically how these factors feed into improving its chances for success. In doing so, this discussion replaces the seeming mystique on ISIS methodology via emotion with tangible metrics and warning signs capable of signaling a vulnerability and/or likelihood of recruitment surge.

Related and unlike other works on ISIS, Goswami adopted a literal hands-on approach in assessing potential for ISIS intrusion into South and Southeast Asia. Her visits to these countries and familiarity with their populations and governance systems provide a much needed, candid perspective beyond known data and simple narrative assessment. Instead, discussions on the four countries highlight current discrepancies between different Muslim factions, significance of recent attacks toward future ones, and finally techniques ISIS is using to create rifts between Muslim and non-Muslim populations. It is

this type of hands-on approach that will resonate with special operators and their communities. Included in this monograph is a vital chapter on narratives employed and the techniques behind them. This discussion is essential, as psychological operations are a core component in predicting future ISIS activities, notably recruitment segmentation.

Still, and with seemingly countless monographs and scholarly articles on this topic, why is this monograph any different? Simply put: it stands as perhaps the only one written for the special operations community. The author purposefully discusses potential ISIS threats in South and Southeast Asia noting United States Special Operations Command authorities and mission sets, and how and where core capabilities can create the greatest impact. Moreover—and recognizing both gray zone and transregional challenges for special operators—Goswami provides a strong argument for Bangladesh, Burma, India, and Indonesia as the key areas of emphasis for future counterterrorism and counter-radicalization efforts. Even existing scholars of the region are apt to find new and invaluable insights on where sociological, cultural, and political variables of this region intersect with ISIS opportunity.

Paul S. Lieber, Ph.D.  
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## About the Authors

**D**r. Namrata Goswami is an independent strategic analyst and consultant on counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, alternate futures, and great power politics. After earning her Ph.D. in international relations, she served for nearly a decade at India's Ministry of Defense-sponsored think tank, the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi, working on ethnic conflicts in India's Northeast and China-India border conflict.



She is the author of three books, *India's National Security and Counter-Insurgency, Asia 2030* and *Asia 2030: The Unfolding Future*. Her research and expertise generated opportunities for collaborations abroad, and she accepted visiting fellowships at the Peace Research Institute, Oslo, Norway; La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia; and the University of Heidelberg, Germany. In 2012, she was selected to serve as a Jennings-Randolph Senior Fellow at the United States Institute of Peace, Washington D.C. where she studied India-China border issues. She was awarded a Fulbright-Nehru Senior Fellowship that same year. Shortly after establishing her own strategy and policy consultancy, she won the prestigious MINERVA Grant awarded by the Office of the U.S. Secretary of Defense to study great power competition in the gray zone of outer space.

With expertise in international relations, ethnic conflicts, counterinsurgency, war-gaming, scenario building, and conflict resolution, she has been asked to consult for audiences as diverse as Wikistrat, United States Pacific Command, United States Special Operations Command, the Indian military, and the Indian government. She was the first representative from South Asia chosen to participate in the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies NATO Partnership for Peace Consortium 'Emerging Security Challenges Working Group.' She also received the Executive Leadership Certificate sponsored by the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, National Defense University, and the Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies. Currently, she is working on two book projects, one on ethnic narratives, to be published by Oxford University Press, and the second on great power ambitions, to be published by Lexington Press, an imprint of Rowman and Littlefield.

**D**r. Robert A. Norton is a professor at Auburn University and currently serves as coordinator of National Security Initiatives in the Auburn University Open Source Intelligence Laboratory and Program Director of the Futures Laboratory—a collaborative effort between Auburn University, Auburn University at Montgomery, and Air University at Maxwell Air Force Base. A long-time consultant to multiple federal agencies and the Department of Defense, Dr. Norton’s research interests include public health/one health, intelligence analysis, chemical and biological weapons defense, medical and technical intelligence, military-related science and technology, biosecurity/biodefense, and veterinary infectious diseases. In August 2017, Dr. Norton received the prestigious Knowlton Award from the Military Corps Association for his support of the Military Intelligence Corps.

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# Acknowledgements

It gives me immense joy to offer my thanks and gratitude to my colleagues from Auburn University, Alabama, Robert (Bob) Norton and Greg Weaver, for their contributions to the project. Bob alerted me to the possibility of working on a JSOU project, and he and Greg have contributed an excellent chapter to the monograph. My heartfelt thanks go out to Pete McCabe, JSOU, for support in the initial stages of the monograph. To Paul S. Lieber, JSOU, who helped refine the work with his incisive suggestions and comments, expertly guiding the monograph to publication. A big thank you to the JSOU editorial team for an excellent job in editing this work.

Working on an issue dealing with violent conflict can be hard, especially while unpacking the various layers of narratives that exist in a conflict zone, with very real and devastating impacts, on peoples' lives. In this regard, I always remain indebted to those whom I met during field work, for their insights, courage, and willingness to share with me their everyday experiences. Such interviews and conversations helped me form a more nuanced understanding of societies affected by insurgent/terrorist violence.

Ultimately, once the data is collected and the reading accomplished, writing is a solitary act. In that regard, a family's generosity in granting time at your desk, is, I believe, the greatest gift they can offer an author. To that end, I remain deeply thankful to my family and the love and support they offered during this time.



## Introduction

The aim of terrorist groups is to create disorder within states by violent means for political ends. These end goals include local or transnational policy change, social control, or regime change. Terror groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have demonstrated global aspirations and transnational reach across several continents in order to spread their ideologies and establish a *sharia*-based (Islamic religious legal system) governance. Terrorist groups use propaganda, social networks, psychological fear, and ethnic and religious linkages to spread roots and establish presence. For example, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, a terrorist group that represented itself as fighting for Tamil causes in Sri Lanka, enjoyed diasporic support and presence outside of its country of operation. With the advent of the internet, the ability to establish a virtual presence and motivate terror attacks across the globe has increased manifold.<sup>1</sup> This aspect is amplified by the ability of ISIS to inspire attacks in Europe and the U.S., attract foreign fighters to its causes and spread its propaganda. For instance, the 2 December 2015 San Bernardino terror attacks that killed 14 people and wounded 22 were perpetrated by Syed Rizwan Farook and his wife, Tashfeen Malik [the former a U.S. citizen, the latter a permanent resident]. Farook pledged allegiance to ISIS on behalf of both attackers on his Facebook page.<sup>2</sup>

With the defeat of ISIS in major cities and towns in Iraq and Syria by an international coalition, its attempt to spread to other countries is likely to intensify. ISIS plans to inspire lone wolf-type attacks to signal its capability to continue launching terrorist strikes. This aspect was highlighted in the 31 October 2017 Manhattan terror attack. Sayfullo Habibullaevic Saipov, an Uzbekistan national living in the U.S. since 2010 deliberately drove a rented truck on the wrong side of the road killing eight people and injuring nearly a dozen. A note discovered in his truck claimed that his attack was ISIS inspired.<sup>3</sup> In testimony to the House's Homeland Security Task Force on "Denying Terrorist Entry into the United States," Thomas Joscelyn, Senior Editor of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies' *Long War Journal*,

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*The aim of terrorist groups is to create disorder within states by violent means for political ends.*

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specified that the fall of Mosul or Raqqa does not signify the end of ISIS; that it will continue to function as a guerilla group.<sup>4</sup> The Office of the Director of National Intelligence indicated that even though ISIS was losing ground and resources, it “will likely have enough resources and fighters to sustain insurgency operations and plan terrorists [sic] attacks in the region and internationally going forward.”<sup>5</sup>

The stated end goal of ISIS is to establish a *Dar-al-Islam* (caliphate) where sharia laws apply.<sup>6</sup> To this end, the group has established provinces around the globe, prominent being the Libyan and Khorasan *Wilayats* (Provinces). With the fall of Mosul and Raqqa, ISIS fighters will attempt to relocate to Tunisia, Niger, Somalia—countries that have seen some of the highest foreign fighter recruits to ISIS.<sup>7</sup> Specifically for this monograph, the critical puzzle is whether ISIS can extend its reach to Bangladesh, Burma, the Indian subcontinent, and Indonesia. The usage of *al-Sham* is interesting as it is meant to indicate ‘Greater Syria’ which has historically included modern Syria, Jordan, South Turkey, Lebanon, and Israel-Palestine.<sup>8</sup> Basing their propaganda and their politics on the apocalyptic belief of end-times, ISIS portrays their idea of the caliphate as integral to human existence, and a space where the “*Mahdi*” or “messiah” will return to rescue humankind from sin. ISIS press releases and propaganda continuously remind its target audience that Allah (used as name of God in Islam) has chosen them (ISIS) alone, to rule and administer over true Muslims, and to purify and cleanse them of false faith.<sup>9</sup>

ISIS forwards the vision of a decisive battle in Dabiq, Syria, in which the ‘Western crusaders’ will be defeated resulting in triumph of the Global Islamic caliphate.<sup>10</sup> This kind of belief system or ideology encourages perpetual wars, and genocidal tendencies, and anyone viewed by ISIS as *kuffar* (disbeliever) is an infidel, to be annihilated.<sup>11</sup> The significance of an apocalyptic view for ISIS is vindicated by its desperate need to capture a strategically inconsequential town, Dabiq, Syria, represented as the sacred site of end-times in Islamic eschatology and finding mention in the *Hadith* (text containing the traditions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad). The word *al-sham* also finds frequent mention in Islamic prophesies.<sup>12</sup> This necessity to occupy Dabiq, given the emphasis ISIS places on apocalyptic literature, is that it provides the group with seeming legitimacy, which in turn draws resources and recruits. In a similar streak, ISIS justifies its destruction of historic sites in Palmyra, Syria as necessary for the apocalypse. This ranges from

the destruction of the Temple of Bel to shrines of Muslim saints, something that ISIS views as anti-Islam. In carrying out these acts, ISIS aims to destroy earlier symbols of memory and history while at the same time creating and controlling their history by claiming strict adherence to Islamic scriptures. This trend of destroying memorabilia continues the Abbasid Caliphs' actions of destroying the Umayyad Caliphs' graves in 750 A.D. followed by Mongols destroying the architecture of the Abbasids in 1258 A.D.<sup>13</sup>

One can only speculate whether ISIS truly believes in their apocalyptic ideas or utilizes these ideas instrumentally to target audiences who believe in such mythology. Nevertheless, their propaganda refers to it endlessly. This aspect of the group was highlighted by former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Army General Martin Dempsey: "They can be contained, but not in perpetuity. This is an organization that has an apocalyptic, end-of-days strategic vision which will eventually have to be defeated."<sup>14</sup>

Significantly, unlike al-Qaeda, ISIS succeeded in establishing a state over which it governed. Similar to a state, the ISIS caliphate is based on a taxation system that aims to draw resources and recruits from the population it governs, and runs its own education and banking systems.<sup>15</sup> That state-based vision and expansion has now stalled due to a successful international coalition against ISIS. Over the last few years since its founding in July 2014, ISIS has lost territory in both Iraq and Syria. It has lost its grip on Mosul, Iraq, the site from where it declared its caliphate, and over Raqqa, its capital in Syria, which was captured by U.S.-backed forces in October 2017.<sup>16</sup> With the loss of territory, its ability to turn out slick social media propaganda has taken a hit, and so has its finances.<sup>17</sup> However, ISIS has continued to inspire suicide attacks as was witnessed in the Paris attacks in November 2015, and the Barcelona attacks in 2017. According to a CNN report, ISIS planned or inspired around 143 terror attacks in 29 countries worldwide since 2014 resulting in 2,043 deaths.<sup>18</sup> ISIS claimed responsibility for the London underground train station bombing that left 29 people injured on 15 September 2017 stating that it was "carried out by a detachment of the Islamic State."<sup>19</sup>

While the U.S.-led international coalition has succeeded in eliminating several top ISIS leaders—to include its spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani—the ideology of ISIS will continue to fester through its rank and file going underground and spreading online.<sup>20</sup> There are no clear estimates of how many members ISIS still has given the discrepancy in the data on ISIS members at its peak in 2014. While Hisam al-Hashani, a Baghdad-based

security expert, claimed that ISIS had a total of 100,000 members at its peak,<sup>21</sup> the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) estimates the number between 20,000 and 31,000 in late 2014.<sup>22</sup> Fuad Hussein, Chief of Staff to former Kurdish President Massoud Barzani, estimates its peak number is even higher, at 200,000. ISIS ambitions to expand to Indonesia is examined in-depth in the monograph. Indonesia is an interesting case given the fact that ISIS aims to expand its presence to the largest Sunni Muslim country in the world. According to General Gatot Nurmantyo, Indonesia's military chief, ISIS cells have infiltrated all provinces in Indonesia, and these sleeper cells could easily cross the border into the Philippines and Malaysia.<sup>23</sup> There are concerns that Indonesia may be sliding into political intolerance, especially after the imprisonment of Jakarta's former Christian Governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, on a blasphemy charge.<sup>24</sup> Another critical area for examination is whether existing terrorist groups in Indonesia will align with ISIS goals and work towards spreading its extremist ideology locally.<sup>25</sup> Experts have flagged the steady increase in Salafist ideology within the government in Indonesia and growing anti-Shiite sentiments in the region.<sup>26</sup> For instance, neighboring Malaysia has banned Shiite Islam.<sup>27</sup> ISIS inspired groups like *Katibah Nusantara*, based in Malaysia, have members from Indonesia and Philippines. ISIS usage of local languages for propaganda, has been effective in spreading their ideas to its target audience.<sup>28</sup>

The stated objective of the 2014 U.S.-led international coalition against ISIS is to 'degrade and destroy' ISIS and its caliphate in Iraq and Syria.<sup>29</sup> The 68 member coalition worked with local partners to wrest territory from ISIS control, helped stabilize liberated areas in the post-ISIS phase, and limited the spread of ISIS globally with the help of information-based operations. These operations have included countering extremist recruitments, cutting off ISIS financing, and limiting the spread of the ISIS narrative to intended audiences.<sup>30</sup> The coalition, along with the Iraqi army, have retaken Mosul, Iraq from ISIS, and have succeeded in liberating about 62 percent of territory from ISIS hold in Iraq and 30 percent in Syria. About \$22.2 billion has been expended in these efforts.<sup>31</sup> The coalition is concentrating on counter-messaging, especially through the United Arab Emirates, UK, and U.S.-led Global Counter ISIS Coalition Communications Working Group. Messaging centers routinely counter and expose ISIS, as well as generate positive content online, which the audiences can access and contrast it with ISIS perspectives.<sup>32</sup> Significantly, due to coalition efforts, ISIS-held territories in

Iraq and Syria have been cut off from each other. The flow of foreign fighters to Iraq and Syria has declined, and thousands of ISIS fighters have died in battle.<sup>33</sup> The critical concern here is the continuance of ungoverned spaces, both in Iraq and Syria, where ISIS may mingle in with local networks, and remerge at a later date.<sup>34</sup>

While the objective of wresting control of ISIS-held territory has been achieved,<sup>35</sup> the ideology that the group unleashed has the potential to fester, and inspire radical groups elsewhere especially based on ISIS's "remaining and expanding" goals.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, literature on terrorism and insurgency suggests that terrorists and insurgent groups tend to go underground when weakened and resurface when they believe they have gathered enough capability and resources.<sup>37</sup> The history of ISIS itself reveals such a pattern. In 2007, the 80,000 strong 'Sunni Awakening' in Iraq fought against Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and successfully limited its influence. Al-Qaeda's leaders like Abu Ayyub al-Masri and Abu Omar al Baghdadi were thought killed in 2010 in a joint Iraqi-U.S. military operation.<sup>38</sup> Among those who survived was Abu Bakr al Baghdadi who went on to lead ISIS after slipping into Syria and regrouping there.<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, ISIS presents itself to its local target audiences in Iraq and Syria as representative of the repressed and disenfranchised Sunni population, as advocates for them offering them a less oppressive political state.<sup>40</sup> Given the reality of sectarian divides in Syria and Iraq, such an idea will not disappear even if ISIS as a group is weakened. Moreover, ISIS has cleverly created a discourse to justify its defeat vis-à-vis the international coalition by couching it in 'Us vs. crusaders' terminology, and framing the coalition's counter-attack as a "war on Islam" per se.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, its discourses are mostly aimed at portraying ISIS as the winning side, always on the move, always successful in what it does.<sup>42</sup>

It is in this context that this monograph examines ISIS stated goals, inspired by their vision to expand to the Indian subcontinent, Bangladesh, Burma, and Indonesia. Despite having three of the largest Muslim populations in the world, the recruitment rate to ISIS has been comparatively low from these countries, compared to countries like the UK, Germany, and France. For instance, India has registered cases against 75 individuals suspected to be involved with ISIS activities.<sup>43</sup> Amongst them, about 23 Indians, mostly from the state of Kerala, have traveled to the caliphate in Iraq and Syria.<sup>44</sup> Around 30 Bangladeshis have joined ISIS,<sup>45</sup> and about 700 have been recruited from Indonesia.<sup>46</sup> What is missing from these low numbers are the

number of sympathizers ISIS may have in these countries and the potential for clandestine expansion.

The United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) deals with the threat of terrorism, both from the perspective of irregular warfare (IW) and counterterrorism (CT).<sup>47</sup> Therefore, understanding the goals, ideology, recruitment strategies, and propaganda of ISIS, as well as its intentions to spread its networks to other regions of the world, falls directly within their mission set. Toward this end, conducting foreign internal defense (FID) provides direct and indirect support to foreign governments and their agencies to combat insurgency and terrorism, among other threats, and helps protect their societies from internal violence.<sup>48</sup> In its operations in the Middle East, USSOCOM works alongside local governments and their militaries, including the Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Service and Kurdish forces, especially the People's Protection Units. U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) are not only advising senior local officers, but also accompanying local forces on the frontline to advise them and increase their firepower.<sup>49</sup> There are U.S. SOF members in advisor capacities in Iraq and Syria, roles where they work alongside local forces in the front against ISIS.<sup>50</sup> There are also U.S. SOF in combat positions in Syria. According to the U.S. Department of Defense, as of December 2017, the U.S. had approximately 5,200 troops in Iraq and 2,000 troops in Syria.<sup>51</sup> Local commanders have the power to temporarily increase this number if conditions so demand.<sup>52</sup>

That said, with the loss of territory in Iraq and Syria, ISIS fighters will likely attempt to carry out terror strikes and increase their presence outside of the caliphate. This amounts to the concept of 'costly signaling,' where terror groups aim to target civilians to communicate credibility and draw resources from their target audience.<sup>53</sup> We have seen ISIS-inspired attacks in France, the UK, and the United States. This monograph examines the potential and capability of ISIS to expand beyond these efforts, and to establish a formal presence in countries like Bangladesh, Burma, India, and Indonesia. These countries were chosen for closer examination for two reasons. First, they were included in the group's future expansionist goals. Second, they offer insights across South and Southeast Asia, the two regions with the largest Muslim population in the world.

The study offers perspectives into the societal and political conditions within these four countries toward limiting the influence of extremist groups like ISIS. Similarly, this research outlines considerations for USSOCOM

to strengthen mechanisms that negate the impact and spread of extremist ideologies. The key research questions that this monograph examines are as follows:

### Research Questions

1. What are the factors within Indonesia and India that make their Muslim populations immune to the ISIS ideology?
2. Are these factors true with regard to countries like Bangladesh and Burma?
3. Are political and social conditions in Indonesia and India different from countries with high ISIS recruitment like Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, France, and the UK?
4. Despite having young Muslim populations, as well as high rates of unemployment and poverty, why has ISIS failed to spread rapidly in countries like India, Indonesia, and Burma?
5. Is Bangladesh an outlier in terms of its growing intolerance toward secularism and free thought?

Chapter 1 on “ISIS Ideology and Strategy” examines the role of ideology in expanding the rise of ISIS as a viable political group. It investigates the contours of that ideology, and explains its hold on ISIS leaders and cadres, as well as its role in gathering popular support. The chapter highlights the all-important variable of ‘legitimacy,’ usually critical for the spread of an insurgent/terrorist group’s worldview, especially with regard to its target population. Specifically, this chapter inspects the strategy adopted by ISIS to occupy territory and spread its ideology. In this, the chapter utilizes speeches by ISIS leaders, sympathizers, and cadres to formulate its arguments. Significantly, it identifies the dominant narratives that exist in areas occupied by ISIS, particularly amongst its target population, with whom ISIS leaders share ethnic kinship and strong pre-ISIS social networks.

Chapter 2, titled “Dynamics of Allegiance, Ideological Propaganda Tools, and Recruitment Patterns,” analyzes how ISIS institutes allegiances with its cadres and target populations. This chapter examines the role of ideological indoctrination, economic and social factors, promised future benefits of recruitment, participatory political organizational structures within ISIS,

and elements of coercive persuasion. Additionally, it details how ISIS allocates tasks to its members and evaluates role performance of its several sub-structures. Understanding the organizational framework of ISIS is critical. The chapter highlights how social connections, control mechanisms, living in similar circumstances, a shared vision of how things should be, elements of empowerment by being part of a group, and finally, fear and intimidation all play a role in establishing allegiance. Combined, these form the patterns of ISIS recruitment.

Chapter 3 on “Bangladesh and Burma: Will ISIS Spread Its Wings?” examines how far ISIS efforts to infiltrate the Muslim populations of Bangladesh and Burma have succeeded. Bangladesh, viewed as rapidly becoming a victim of ISIS propaganda and physical spread, has seen around 30 ISIS recruits from a population of 148.6 million.<sup>54</sup> In a *Dabiq* article titled “The Revival of Jihad in Bengal,” ISIS identified Bangladesh as its next base for operations. Some suspect a linkage between extremist groups within Bangladesh like Jamaat ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and Ansarul-lah Bangla Team (ABT), to ISIS, that may have the potential to spread the group's extremist ideology in the country. Neighboring Burma has drawn the attention of both ISIS and al-Qaeda for the manner in which the Rohingya Muslims have been mistreated within the country.<sup>55</sup> There are concerns that the conditions prevalent in Burma vis-à-vis the Rohingya make it fertile ground for ISIS recruitment and spread.<sup>56</sup> The chapter analyzes whether Bangladesh and Burma are at risk of becoming the next ISIS stronghold, given their rising intolerance toward secularism and free thought.

Chapter 4 details India, a Hindu majority country with the the second largest Muslim population in the world. The country has suffered from a history of Hindu-Muslim internal conflict, beginning with the partition of the country in 1947, to the 1992 demolition of the Babri mosque and 2002 riots in Gujarat. ISIS included India in its 2014 map for expansion. ISIS threatened that it will spread to India to avenge Kashmir, Gujarat, and the demolition of the 1992 mosque. More recently and in a May 2016 video message, ISIS mocked Indian Muslims for living in harmony with *kuffar* (non-believer) Hindus and called upon them to travel to the caliphate. Despite this history, the number of Indian Muslim youth traveling to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS pales in comparison to the high flows from Russia, France, the UK, and Germany.<sup>57</sup> Chapter 4 on “Questioning ISIS Ideology in India” highlights

factors that have worked within the Indian political and social milieu to question and delegitimize groups like ISIS.

Surprisingly, Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the world, has seen the least number of recruits to ISIS, despite being included in the ISIS map for expansion of its hold.<sup>58</sup> This country is therefore the focus of chapter 5. Indonesian ISIS leaders like Bachrumsyah Mennor Usman, Bahrn Naim, and Gigih Rahmat Dewa (in custody in Indonesia, as of the writing of this monograph), physically operated from Iraq and Syria through terror cells there. While this poses a security threat to Indonesia (given they can function with impunity from outside bases, draw local recruits, and attract resources), their hold on the Indonesian radical psyche is limited. Still, with pressure on ISIS to relinquish territory in Iraq and Syria, there are concerns that terror cells will spread to countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. To date, Muslim civil society groups in Indonesia have rejected ISIS ideology and limited its ideological spread. Chapter 5 examines the prevailing structural conditions in Indonesia that have worked against extremist groups like ISIS.

Drawing lessons from successful response structures to ISIS in countries like India and Indonesia, while at the same time being aware of the realistic limits of such lessons, chapter 6 identifies the most feasible, strategic responses by USSOCOM to extremists groups like ISIS. It also discusses ISIS efforts in the cyber domain in more depth before offering solutions. In doing so, the authors argue that ISIS ideology cannot be completely exterminated, and suggests focusing on how to make ISIS ideology unattractive to large pools of populations living in conditions that render them susceptible.

This monograph will prove useful to USSOCOM as well as partner nations involved in the global fight against ISIS. The monograph highlights conditions in Bangladesh that may render it vulnerable to the growth of extremist ideologies. Understanding and identifying these aspects will help predict and avert such a scenario. The intolerance shown towards the Rohingya Muslim community in Burma renders them vulnerable to groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda, who project themselves as saviors of persecuted Muslims globally. It is therefore pertinent to ensure that such structural conditions are not sustained and relief to their plight is offered by an international coalition of countries and the United Nations. Countries like India and Indonesia offer valuable insights on how radical ideas can be weeded out through a participatory democratic process. However, the rise in Hindu nationalism in India

and Salafi influence in Indonesia should be kept in focus while highlighting what has worked in both countries to keep ISIS influence and recruitment to small numbers. The critical need of the hour is to ensure that ISIS does not go underground and then reemerge in regions, other than Iraq and Syria.

## Chapter 1. ISIS Ideology and Strategy: “There is no God but Allah”<sup>59</sup>

ISIS has emerged as one of the dominant terrorist groups originating in the Middle East. Unlike al-Qaeda, ISIS took over vast swaths of land in Iraq and Syria, declared a caliphate, and lured thousands of recruits to its cause. In a map published in July 2014, ISIS declared that it is not simply an organization like al-Qaeda, but a state, with all the attributes that come with it—government, people, territory, and sovereignty.<sup>60</sup> By declaring an Islamic state, ISIS sent the message that this state is not limited to Iraq and Syria, but will spread its presence to North Africa (the Maghreb), Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Andalusia (Spain), Cameroon, Somalia, Ethiopia, Azerbaijan, Pakistan, and Xinjiang province in China, as well as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Turkey, Iran, and other Gulf states. ISIS also declared its intentions to spread to South, Central, and Southeast Asia.<sup>61</sup> The significant departure of ISIS—from al-Qaeda’s operational ideational ethos—is its desire to physically spread. Al-Qaeda’s focus is to spread its ideas and influence other terror groups. And in that, al-Qaeda has succeeded.<sup>62</sup> After all, ISIS is a successor to AQI, led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian. How al-Zarqawi broke off from Osama bin Laden, possibly over differences about al-Zarqawi’s brutal tactics of beheadings and extreme violence against Shias, or that AQI was an arm of al-Qaeda, is only speculation, but it is a fact that the two groups shared the same vision of a global Muslim *ummah* (Islamic community).

Significantly, al-Zarqawi traveled to Afghanistan in the 1980s and met with bin Laden, although they had differences over operational tactics and goals.<sup>63</sup> Al-Qaeda was focused on the far enemy—the U.S.—while al-Zarqawi was focused on the near enemy—namely, Jordan and Israel, as well as the Shias. Despite these differences, bin Laden financed al-Zarqawi’s training camp in Afghanistan. After the U.S. attacks on Afghanistan post-9/11, al-Zarqawi traveled via Iran, Syria, Lebanon, and Kurdish territory to arrive in Iraq. In 2003, after the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime, al-Zarqawi succeeded in taking advantage of the resultant chaos, and took center stage in fighting against the U.S. occupation under the organizational name of Jama’at al-Tawhid wa’al-Jihad (JTJ)—al-Jihad, or The Party of Monotheism and Jihad (JHJ). JTJ, led by al-Zarqawi,

attacked non-combatants and aid workers in Iraq. The group also strategically targeted Shias in Iraq to create the conditions of a sectarian conflict.<sup>64</sup> In October 2004, perhaps motivated by the advantages of aligning itself to a well-established terror group with a reputation, JTJ gave allegiance, or *bay'ah*, to al-Qaeda and renamed itself Tanzim Qaidat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn Zarqawi, known as AQI.<sup>65</sup> However, AQI's extreme tactics were criticized by al-Qaeda, and its leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, sent a letter to al-Zarqawi cautioning him against such tactics of deliberately targeting civilians. In the letter, al-Zawahiri was careful not to alienate al-Zarqawi, offering him lavish praise on his success in Iraq, which the former believed was the core gem in the fight for Islam. Al-Zawahiri went on to argue that:

It has always been my belief that the victory of Islam will never take place until a Muslim state is established in the manner of the Prophet in the heart of the Islamic world, specifically in the Levant, Egypt, and the neighboring states of the Peninsula and Iraq; however, the center would be in the Levant and Egypt.<sup>66</sup>

In the letter, al-Zawahiri states that al-Zarqawi is blessed to have the fortune and privilege denied to many fellow Muslim *mujahideen*, that allows him to wage jihad at the heart of the Islamic world. Al-Zawahiri, while denouncing apostates and infidels, expressed great concern with al-Zarqawi's tactics and extreme acts of violence against them. Al-Zawahiri stressed the significance of popular support and cautioned against using extreme puritanical measure in the field to judge how people behave. He believed that without popular support across the sectarian divide, to include Shias, it was impossible to defeat the Americans or outsiders. The Muslim masses, if fearful of AQI, would automatically gravitate to the national government set up by foreigners. He stated that AQI should learn to appease the masses and create conditions for their participation in its activities, including governance.<sup>67</sup> Al-Zawahiri was in favor of establishing an emirate, and not a caliphate immediately. He devised a stage-by-stage plan of what AQI should do, from expelling the Americans from Iraq to establishing an Islamic state that is supported by all Muslim masses (he did not specify that the state should be only Sunni-based).

Yet, a close reading of al-Zawahiri's letter reveals much more than simply concern with al-Zarqawi's tactics, as is most often offered up by mainstream media.<sup>68</sup> The letter reveals al-Zawahiri's desire to plan for a post-American

withdrawal scenario in Iraq. He envisioned establishing a sharia-based emirate, or Islamic state, in Iraq. Hence, while there are those who believe that al-Qaeda did not support the establishment of a caliphate until the Muslim masses were ready, al-Zawahiri believed that establishing an Islamic authority or caliphate was critical, and that it would allow them to seize the initiative when the Americans left Iraq. With popular support based on consensus and loyalty, it was bound to succeed. Al-Zawahiri cautioned against breaking up the ummah, or Islamic nation, simply because someone did not belong to the pure sect. Small mistakes and heresies, he argued, are forgivable in the face of the larger goal—establishment of the caliphate. Al-Zawahiri warned against attacks on the Shia or their places of worship.

The context of Iraq was dramatically changed with the sudden ascendency of Shias to prominent positions in the government and military in the post-Saddam era, bolstered by the divisive policies of Nouri al-Maliki, the Shia prime minister of Iraq from 2006 to 2014.<sup>69</sup> Al-Maliki is accused of planting the seeds for the ISIS takeover of major cities in Iraq, due to the alienation felt by the Sunni population during the period he was in power. Al-Maliki played an instrumental role in bringing together the Sunni tribes of Iraq under the ‘Sunni Awakening’ that nearly defeated AQI between 2007 and 2010. However, once the American forces withdrew from Iraq at the end of 2011, al-Maliki turned against Sunni politicians in his own cabinet. Thousands of innocent Sunnis were arrested, creating a backlash and general alienation. Protests against these arrests drew tens of thousands of people in Ramadi, Mosul, Fallujah, Samarra, and Kirkuk. Subsequently, al-Maliki’s heavy-handed response to the protests sowed the seeds of extremism, which continued to grow fast.<sup>70</sup> In retrospect, given the divisive conditions created by his government, the quick takeover of Fallujah and Mosul by ISIS is easy to understand. As al-Zawahiri had so distinctly warned AQI not to do, the Iraqi government under al-Maliki lost popular support.<sup>71</sup>

## Origins of ISIS

The origins of ISIS trace back to al-Zarqawi, when he floated the idea of establishing an Islamic state in 2002. Appearing in several videos, including ones of brutal beheadings that drew the attention of millions, al-Zarqawi argued that the goal of AQI is to ultimately establish an Islamic state based on sharia law.<sup>72</sup> He took advantage of the fame thrust upon him when Colin

Powell identified him as the eminent reason to attack Saddam Hussein in a speech to the United Nations (UN) Security Council while building a case for the U.S. invasion into Iraq.<sup>73</sup> When a bounty of \$25 million was offered for information on al-Zarqawi's whereabouts, it elevated his status in the world of competitive terrorism, as the bounty was equal to the reward offered for information on Osama bin Laden. Reputation-building aside, al-Zarqawi, who long had been motivated to establish a political identity in which religion played an important part, suddenly found himself capable of drawing resources and recruits to establish his own organization.<sup>74</sup> As mentioned earlier, he set up the JTJ, which took advantage of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 to establish its roots. From 2002 to 2004, al-Zarqawi engineered bombings across Iraq, aimed at the U.S. forces and Iraqi Shias. Iraq descended into sectarian civil war when al-Zarqawi bombed the shrine of Imam Ali in Najaf, which killed one of the Shia's most revered *imams*, (Muslim leaders), Ayatullah Mohammed Bakir al-Hakim.<sup>75</sup> It was the killing of al-Hakim by al-Zarqawi that led al-Zawahiri to admonish him in a letter, where he bemoaned, "Has any Islamic state in history ever tried that? And why kill ordinary Shia considering that they are forgiven because of their ignorance? And what loss will befall us if we did not attack the Shia?"<sup>76</sup> However, on the day of the bombing in 2003, suspicion ranged from al-Qaeda, to the ultra-conservative and orthodox Sunni *Wahhabis* to Muqtada al-Sadr, leader of the Shia militia known as Jaish-e-Mahdi, known to have a deep hatred of the American presence in Iraq. Sadr's militia tried to coerce Grand Ayatullah Ali al-Sistani, supreme religious leader of Iraqi Shi'ites, to leave the country due to his support for the American plans for Iraq's future.

The Iraqis could not believe that a fellow Iraqi, whether a Shia or Sunni, could wreak such havoc on a local mosque, no matter how severe their differences.<sup>77</sup> It turns out that their gut instinct was right, because the man who carried out these bombings was not an Iraqi, but a Jordanian (al-Zarqawi), who had several fellow Jordanians within his fold in Iraq.<sup>78</sup> At the time of these bombings al-Zarqawi acted independently; he pledged his allegiance to al-Qaeda in October 2004.<sup>79</sup> For its part, al-Qaeda was looking to expand its own network in Iraq and the Levant, and thus overlooked al-Zarqawi's extreme tactics and accepted his allegiance. According to al-Qaeda's security chief Saif al-'Adl's letter to Jordanian journalist Fuad Husayn, during the original 1999 meeting between al-Zarqawi and bin Laden, al-'Adl acted as a negotiator, working to arrive at some settlement between them despite

their differences. Al-Zarqawi did not pledge his allegiance to al-Qaeda at that time. Bin Laden later dismissed al-'Adl's letter as false, and this aspect is highlighted by Brian Fishman, who argues that al-Qaeda agreed to fund al-Zarqawi's camp in Herat, Afghanistan, as a result of the growing strife in jihadi circles, and not because of al-'Adl's mediation.<sup>80</sup> While Fishman presents bin Laden's annoyance with al-'Adl's suggestion that a deal was negotiated, he does not question the motives behind bin Laden's desire to discredit al-'Adl's version. Since bin Laden goes to great pains to discredit him, it may be possible that al-'Adl got certain facts wrong, such as the presence of al-Zawahiri at the meeting when he was not a member of al-Qaeda (al-Zawahiri signed a merger agreement with bin Laden in 2001). Nevertheless, history does not address<sup>81</sup> why bin Laden agreed to finance al-Zarqawi despite him withholding his allegiance. Several factors could have influenced bin Laden's decision, including fears of being subverted by influential figures like chief architect of al-Qaeda's strategy and one of the leaders who worked with bin Laden in Afghanistan in the 1990s<sup>82</sup>—Abu Musab al-Suri, or by growing counterintelligence on al-Qaeda's activities, yet it does not obviate the fact that he helped al-Zarqawi set up shop. Nor does it explain why al-Zarqawi finally gave his allegiance to al-Qaeda and created AQI.

After al-Zarqawi's death in June 2006 during an American air strike,<sup>83</sup> AQI announced Abu Ayyub al-Masri, a.k.a. Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, an Egyptian, as its leader. His foreign origin drew criticism from AQI members. Al-Masri, in order to stifle the criticism, declared the establishment of an Islamic state to bring divergent jihadi forces together. In April 2010, al-Masri and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, the shadowy top leader of this Islamic state, were thought killed.<sup>84</sup> It was during this time that the Sunni Awakening, comprised of several Sunni tribes, and Iraqi and American forces decapitated AQI.<sup>85</sup> The period between 2006 and 2010 was one of the toughest for al-Qaeda, with depleted resources, and a lack of leadership directives. The death of Osama bin Laden dealt them an additional blow.

It is in this situation of depletion, and defeat that the embers of ISIS began to glow. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was in the American-run Camp Bucca prison in Iraq in 2004 when the environment in the country was replete with daily bomb attacks.<sup>86</sup> Upon release in December 2004, al-Baghdadi and several fellow prisoners went underground and crossed over to Syria, where civil unrest was increasing against its leader, Bashar al-Assad. Some former ISIS members credit the group's rise to power to the period in Camp

Bucca, when al-Baghdadi formed the strategy and connections that served him well later.<sup>87</sup> After U.S. troops left Iraq in 2011, the divisions between Shia and Sunni communities in Iraq offered the perfect conditions for al-Baghdadi, who by then had joined AQI. By 2013, Baghdadi made preparations to strike inside Iraq from Syria, where AQI had regrouped. There are allegations that the Syrian military intelligence helped set up meetings between disenfranchised Iraqi Baath Party members, jihadists, and AQI members.<sup>88</sup> The hand of Syrian Sunnis in Iraq's insurgency in turn angered Prime Minister al-Maliki, and could have influenced his decision to remove Sunnis from his cabinet, fomenting even more sectarian strife. For instance, Ali Hatem al-Suleiman, a major Sunni Dulaimi tribal leader from Anbar province, Iraq, was ousted from Baghdad for criticizing Iran's Shia supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Included in this group of influential Sunni politicians are former deputy Prime Minister Saleh al-Mutlaq, and former Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi.<sup>89</sup> Another former deputy prime minister from the Saddam Hussein era, and a Chaldean Catholic and Baathist party member, Tariq Aziz, stated that the exit of American troops would land Iraq in the hands of wolves (al-Maliki).<sup>90</sup> It was the fear that al-Maliki was creating a Shia autocracy, ironically similar to Saddam Hussein's Sunni autocracy, that resulted in Sunni tribes in Iraq looking toward the Sunni insurgents in Syria.

Sheikh Majid Dulaimi, the foremost chief of the Dulaimi tribe, stated that:

The Americans promised that Iraq would be a beacon of democracy in the Middle East, that it would flourish. But it has been totally the opposite. All we have are car bombs, suicide vests, ugly sectarianism and after all that, Iranian occupation.<sup>91</sup>

When the Americans left in 2011, peaceful Sunni protests against al-Maliki were met with disproportionate force by government forces, resulting in several deaths. During those years (2011 to 2014), incidents like the brutal arrest of Sunni parliamentarian Waleed Jassem al-Alwani, a.k.a. Abu Ahmad al-Alwani, further inflamed sectarian feuds. Violence erupted in Fallujah and Ramadi, and al-Maliki sent in the army to quell protests. Forty-four Sunni members of parliament resigned. Sunni security forces abandoned their posts in protest. By the time al-Maliki called back the troops to rectify his mistake, ISIS, still a splinter group of al-Qaeda then, was already rolling in from Syria.<sup>92</sup> It was in this environment of power struggles including Sunni anger at being sidelined despite helping in the fight against AQI, al-Maliki's

deliberate sectarian feud, and the old Sunni desire to be head of the pack that proved ripe for the entry of al-Baghdadi from Syria in 2014. Since the 18th century, the Sunnis had dominated the power structure in Iraq. After the American invasion, the Shias became the power brokers for the first time, in the process sidelining the Sunnis.

## Strategic Dimensions of ISIS

It was in this scenario of sectarian violence that the al-Baghdadi-led ISIS entered. With growing civil war in Syria, the border between Syria and Iraq disappeared. Border crossings between Aleppo, Syria, and Anbar, Iraq, occurred without the need for passports and visas. Major portions of the Sunni population of Iraq—feeling a sense of siege under the rule of al-Maliki—welcomed ISIS, and the security forces in Sunni-dominated cities like Mosul, Fallujah, and Ramadi offered little resistance. Within a matter of weeks, Mosul was taken over by ISIS and the Iraqi army fled, leaving all their weaponry behind. Other Sunni cities fell to ISIS, as well. This brings us back to the idea that al-Zawahiri spoke about in his letter to al-Zarqawi—popular support. Without Sunni popular support, the Iraqi army did not stand a chance in cities like Mosul, Kirkuk, Tikrit, Ramadi, and Fallujah. Emboldened by the civil unrest in Syria, as well as other parts of the Middle East and North Africa, like Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, ISIS advanced unchallenged. It was in Syria that AQI, and then ISIS, regrouped and rebranded after the losses they suffered during the Sunni Awakening. It was from there the onslaught on Iraq ensued.

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*Major portions of the Sunni population of Iraq—feeling a sense of siege under the rule of al-Maliki—welcomed ISIS, and the security forces in Sunni-dominated cities like Mosul, Fallujah, and Ramadi offered little resistance.*

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In light of this background and history, six dimensions of ISIS strategy stand out as remarkable. There could be many other dimensions,<sup>93</sup> but for brevity and specificity, this chapter highlights the following six dimensions: *territory, politics, ideology, legitimacy, dynamics of allegiance and recruitment, and timing*. The strategic dimension of *territory* includes an examination of the declaration of an Islamic state and its organizing principles within a territory. It describes the sanctity given to territory and the call by ISIS to all

Muslims to travel to this territory to give their allegiance to al-Baghdadi. The second strategic dimension of *politics* examines the power structures within ISIS and offers insights into its structure. The third strategic dimension, *ideology*, explains the belief system of ISIS, especially its usage of religious texts to justify its existence. This section examines the influence of Salafism and the Sahwa movement in Saudi Arabia on ISIS. The fourth strategic dimension of *legitimacy* highlights the legitimization process undertaken by ISIS in announcing al-Baghdadi as the Caliph. In this, the ancestral links to the prophet and direct quotations from the Qur'an are utilized. To create legitimacy for the state ISIS established a parallel governance mechanism to include taxation, education, and social welfare. The fifth strategic dimension examines the *dynamics of allegiance and recruitment* to ISIS. Three issues are highlighted: giving *bay'ah* or allegiance, the use of sectarianism as a tool for recruitment, and finally, the usage of the idea of ummah to spread their links. The final strategic dimension is *timing*. ISIS came at a time when the Middle East was suffering from several crises of legitimacy due to the Arab Spring. With regimes falling in Egypt, Libya, and Syria, radical groups filled up the vacuum and ISIS took advantage.

## Territory

One of the most significant and critical measures that ISIS leader al-Baghdadi undertook in July 2014 was the establishment of an Islamic state—the goal of several jihadi terrorist groups including al-Qaeda and the Taliban, as well as civilian political organizations like the Dawa party, of which former Iraqi prime minister al-Maliki was a member.<sup>94</sup> ISIS is perhaps the first terror group that declared the establishment of the Islamic state (caliphate). On 30 June 2014, its spokesperson at the time, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, declared al-Baghdadi as the caliph (leader of all Muslims), stating:

The legality of all emirates, groups, states and organisations becomes null by the expansion of the caliph's authority and the arrival of its troops to their areas ... Listen to your caliph and obey him. Support your state, which grows every day ... The *Shura* [Council] of the Islamic State met and discussed this issue [of the caliphate] ... the Islamic State decided to establish an Islamic caliphate and to designate a caliph for the state of the Muslims.<sup>95</sup>

In its official document, ISIS hailed al-Baghdadi as the descendent of the prophet, the sheikh, and the fighter, and called upon all Muslims to give their allegiance to this self-proclaimed caliph. Calling upon the Muslim ummah, ISIS declared that all associations connected to God, and any shrines, imams, and grave worship are kuffar, and that the flag of *tawhid* (monotheism) covers the land from Aleppo, Syria, to Diyala, Iraq. In this ISIS-ruled territory, *jizyah* (a tax imposed on non-Muslims), sharia law, and penalties are imposed, and *zakat* (an obligatory income tax) must be paid. Within this territory, courts were established to adjudicate disputes, and classes were started in mosques for children. ISIS stated that, within this territory, there also would be a community-based *zakat* called the *wajib kifa'i*—the dream of a *khilāfah* (caliphate), which ISIS termed “the abandoned obligation of the era.” They then quote Allah’s words from the Qur’an, “Indeed, I will make upon the earth a *khalīfah*”,<sup>96</sup> and Imam al-Qurtubī:

This verse is a fundamental basis for the appointment of a leader and *khalīfah* (caliph) who is listened to and obeyed so that the ummah is united by him and his orders are carried out. There is no dispute over this matter between the ummah nor between the scholars, except for what has been reported from al-Asamm [the meaning of his name is ‘the deaf man’], for his deafness prevented him from hearing the Sharia.<sup>97</sup>

Great significance is accorded to these verses, which are then elaborated upon by ISIS:

In light of the fact that the Islamic State has no shar’i constraint or excuse that can justify delaying or neglecting the establishment of the *khilāfah* such that it would not be sinful, the Islamic State—represented by *ahlul-halli-wal-‘aqd* (its people of authority), consisting of its senior figures, leaders, and the *shūrā* council—resolved to announce the establishment of the Islamic *khilāfah*, the appointment of a *khalīfah* for the Muslims, and the pledge of allegiance to the *shaykh* (sheikh), the *mujāhid*, the scholar who practices what he preaches, the worshipper, the leader, the warrior, the reviver, descendent from the family of the Prophet, the slave of Allah, Ibrāhīm Ibn ‘Awwād Ibn Ibrāhīm Ibn ‘Alī Ibn Muhammad al-Badrī al-Hāshimī al-Husaynī al-Qurashī by lineage, as-Sāmurrāī

by birth and upbringing, al-Baghdādī by residence and scholarship. And he has accepted the bay'ah. Thus, he is the imam and khalīfah for the Muslims everywhere.<sup>98</sup>

Consequently, ISIS asserts that it is the obligation of all Muslims to pledge their allegiance to al-Baghdadi.<sup>99</sup> Using the declaration of the caliphate and the territory it held, ISIS called upon all Muslims to rush to the caliphate to exalt themselves, live well, feel honored and esteemed, and live as masters with dignity. Ideas like nationalism, democracy, and secularism are termed garbage, as they are ideas advocated by the West, and Muslims should only aspire to original creed of the caliphate. The official announcement states that once all arrive as part of the ummah, the east and west would submit to them as part of the caliphate. ISIS also asserts that this is a promise given by none other than Allah, and hence will be fulfilled.

Quoting from verses of the scriptures so that it resonates with Muslims who read their announcement, ISIS calls upon every Muslim to travel to the territory they hold. The group justifies its call to all Muslims using Allah's words. ISIS claims that no Muslim could find a legal excuse to deny support to them and that Allah will be pleased if they give their allegiance. ISIS goes on to assert that it's a state for all Muslims (notwithstanding their brutal killings of Shias), then cleverly states that once the caliphate is established, all other jihadi groups, including al-Qaeda, should put down their arms and give *wala'* (loyalty) to the khilāfah. ISIS unilaterally provides itself with the authority to assert that Allah inspired them to declare the caliphate the moment they established control over territory. Anticipating criticism from jihadi circles on this unilateral declaration of the caliphate, the announcement asserts that ISIS had no one to consult with who was superior, and they would be the rallying point for unifying the ummah. This was a direct affront to al-Qaeda, who previously stated that the caliphate cannot be established until the time there is no disunity among Muslims. ISIS goes on to state that declaring a state took precedence over creating unity and consulting with other groups—a process that would have been endless—as “the issue is too urgent.”<sup>100</sup> Moreover, to those who question ISIS authority, Allah is brought in as the final arbitrator:

And if they tell you, “We do not accept your authority”. Then say to them, “We had the ability to establish the khilāfah, by the grace

of Allah, so it became an obligation for us to do so. Therefore, we hastened in adherence to the command of Allah (the Exalted): 'It is not for a believing man or a believing woman, when Allah and His Messenger have decided a matter, that they should [thereafter] have any choice about their affair' [Al-Ahzāb: 36].<sup>101</sup>

Interestingly, despite the Taliban occupying territory in Afghanistan known as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Taliban leader Mullah Omar never declared himself as representing a caliphate. Al-Qaeda, in its online publication *Al Nafir* (call to arms), renewed its pledge of allegiance to Mullah Omar as the emir of the believers on 20 July 2014,<sup>102</sup> thereby challenging al-Baghdadi's announcement of the caliphate in late June of that same year. Al-Baghdadi demanded all jihadi groups and Muslims pledge their loyalty to him, given he was the *Khalifah* (caliph). Al-Qaeda, on the other hand, stated that the caliphate was yet to come, and viewed the ISIS declaration as an attempt to usurp its power.<sup>103</sup>

## Politics

This brings us to the second dimension of ISIS: its politics. ISIS is a political organization with a clear differentiation of power based on hierarchy. While it may use religion or religious texts to guide its actions, or as part of its propaganda, the group is, in effect, a political organization that claims to represent the Sunni sect. Being an offshoot of AQI, which targeted Shias, al-Baghdadi therefore cannot lay claim to the allegiance of all Muslims. ISIS breezily casts aside Shias as not true Muslims, or as kuffar, but not every Muslim views al-Baghdadi or ISIS as representing them or their faith, or believes that the unilateral move of ISIS to declare a caliphate has any legitimacy beyond its own circles.<sup>104</sup> Thereby, the title of Caliph, and the caliphate (region under control of the Caliph) are mostly self-styled declarations. In this scenario, the politics of ISIS becomes paramount.

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So, who are these men and what are their politics? Their hold on territory and quick victories in Iraq propelled them into the limelight, unlike al-Qaeda

who achieved international recognition by indirect attacks on civilians—most notoriously the 9/11 attacks.

At the top of the chain is Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim al-Badri, a.k.a. al-Baghdadi, who claims to have descended from Prophet Muhammad's tribe, the Qurayshi.<sup>105</sup> He claims to have a Ph.D. in Qur'anic studies from the Saddam University for Islamic Studies in Baghdad, thereby manipulating the politics of the acquisition of Islamic knowledge to his advantage. His noble tribe lineage, intellectual prowess, and 'invisible Sheikh' persona all help in creating a mystic image of his personality and thus drawing young recruits to ISIS. This was evident in his sole video appearance in June 2014 to declare the caliphate. Since then, al-Baghdadi has not appeared in any ISIS videos, and has kept an invisible profile, unlike his predecessor, al-Zarqawi, who appeared in several videos, some without a mask, which ultimately got him killed. In his earlier years, al-Baghdadi joined the Muslim Brotherhood, and in the aftermath of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, he formed the insurgent group, Jaysh Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah (Army of the People of the Sunnah and Communal Solidarity).<sup>106</sup>

Amongst his closest aides are Sunnis, again utilizing the politics of sect-based representation. His former closest aide, Taha Sobhi Falaha, a.k.a. Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, the chief strategist and voice of ISIS who was killed in August 2016,<sup>107</sup> was a Sunni from Binnish, Syria. Al-Adnani was instrumental in creating the beheading videos of Westerners, and in appealing to "lone wolves" in the West to carry out terror attacks.<sup>108</sup> In this, he formed and led a group called Emni, that was responsible for internal policing as well as exporting terror abroad. Members of this group were organized in small units by language and nationality. Al-Adnani had formerly given his allegiance to AQI under al-Zarqawi, but went on to challenge al-Qaeda after al-Zarqawi's death. Emni was behind the Brussels and Paris terror attacks planned through a structure of foreign recruits to ISIS. Emni members have slipped into Indonesia, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Germany, Spain, Lebanon, Tunisia, and Austria to carry out attacks.<sup>109</sup>

Al-Adnani was the first ISIS leader to clearly assert the change of ISIS from a terrorist organization to a governing body with territory. This politics of governing is critical, as it creates citizenry, the ruler and the ruled dynamics, law enforcement, health and educational services, as well as social networks and loyalty tiers. ISIS, in its heyday, boasted a 30,000-member strong army, unlike al-Qaeda, who had a few hundred at any given time.<sup>110</sup>

So, having an army and a bureaucracy, including other public services, serves the polity that ISIS established, and creates a history for its sympathizers.

Abu Ayman al-Iraqi was another major ISIS leader, third in terms of rank after al-Baghdadi. Al-Iraqi's main political goal was to create a narrative that was anti-American and anti-Shia, since he viewed the Shia as supporting the American presence in the Middle East. In a telephone conversation in Antakya, Turkey, with a Syrian rebel commander, al-Iraqi argued that:

The West has understood the game. They won't send anyone whose name is William or Benjamin. They'll send people named Ahmed and Mohamed and Abdullah ... The American soldier is expensive, so they will use people from among us—and this is the truth of the battle, they will use you—in the fight against us.<sup>111</sup>

This conversation is important, as it portrays how ISIS leaders create the “us versus them” narrative, and how outsiders play on local sentiments for their selfish benefits. Significantly, al-Iraqi was a colonel in the Iraqi air defense intelligence during Saddam Hussein's regime. Therefore, he came to ISIS with prior military training in conventional army tactics and operations.<sup>112</sup> Al-Iraqi belonged to the largest tribe in Iraq's Anbar province, the Dulaimi tribe, and hence his social network there was strong. This meant he had already established deep-seated social connections due to this tribal connection, as well as his time as a colonel in Saddam's military. Al-Iraqi was in charge of day-to-day military planning for ISIS, and led the group in the Latakia province of Syria.

Fadel Abdullah al-Hiyali, a.k.a. Abu Muslim al-Turkmani, was the deputy leader of ISIS and was killed in a U.S. air strike in December 2014.<sup>113</sup> Interestingly, similar to al-Iraqi, al-Turkmani served in Saddam Hussein's army as a lieutenant colonel, and was part of the special forces and army intelligence units. He joined AQI in 2003, after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, and rose through the ranks to become al-Zarqawi's deputy. Al-Turkmani came from the northern Iraqi town of Tal Afar, populated by Sunni Iraqi Turkmen.

Al-Alwani is a senior military commander for ISIS who also was an officer in Saddam Hussein's military. Those existing contacts and similar military backgrounds gave both al-Turkmani and al-Alwani the pre-ISIS networks that served them well as members of ISIS.

Abd al-Rahman Mustafa al-Shakhilar al-Qaduli, a.k.a. Abu Ali al-Anbari and Hajji Iman, was in charge of intelligence gathering for ISIS. Believed to

be killed on 25 March 2016 in Deir Ezzor, Syria, he once was thought to be a physics teacher, then a major general in Saddam Hussein's army, although these reports may be incorrect. He was closely connected to jihadi terrorism since the 1980s. In 2003, he established the Jihad Squads to resist the American presence in Iraq. He gave several lectures that identified Sunnis supporting the American presence as infidels, decried democratic institutions based on foreign ideas alien to Islam, and was against the separation of powers in the form of laws, constitutions, etc. He also identified the Yazidis as infidels. ISIS doctrine denounces man-made laws and institutions (termed "*tawaghit*" in his speeches). Al-Anbari held that the only hope for all Muslims is to travel to ISIS-held territory to be cleansed of their past sins.<sup>114</sup>

A former sergeant in the Georgian military intelligence, Omar al-Shishani—his real name is Tarkhan Batirashvili—hailed from Pankisi Gorge, near the Chechen-Georgian border. He participated as a noncommissioned officer in the Georgian armed forces during the Russo-Georgian war in 2008. After being discharged from the military, he was jailed on illegal gun charges. Upon his release, he made his way to Syria where he joined ISIS and rose through the ranks. He wielded authority over Aleppo, Raqqa, Latakia, and northern Idlib provinces in Syria, and appeared in several ISIS propaganda videos. He is believed to have died after a U.S. air strike in Syria in March 2016.<sup>115</sup> With his death, ISIS suffered the loss of who they thought of as their defense minister.

When analyzing the rank and portfolios of the ISIS leadership structure, it is striking that there is an equal emphasis on military and political matters. Besides military ranks, ISIS has a minister of general management, a minister of prisoners, minister of general security, minister of finance, minister of foreign fighters and suicide bombers, a minister of social services, as well as governors for the provinces of Iraq and Syria it has governed. For instance, there have been separate governors for Baghdad, Kirkuk, Anbar, Raqqa, Aleppo, etc.<sup>116</sup> ISIS politics is a Sunni-inspired politics, where those that are relevant are mostly Iraqi Sunnis, including Sunni brethren from across borders. Least understood is the draw ISIS holds for several former officers and soldiers from Saddam Hussein's military, which was disbanded after the U.S. invasion. With the establishment of the Islamic state and its army, these officers found a platform to express and use their knowledge and training, and retrieve their lost military-based identities, important in social status and meaning in Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

In reality, most of the Saddam-era Baathist military officers should be at odds with the religious zeal of ISIS given the Baathist secular creed and focus on Arab nationalism. Yet, finding common ground vis-à-vis their hatred for the Iraqi Shia and the American invasion, ex-Baathist military officers revive their sense of importance again within the ISIS military hierarchy. ISIS, by establishing a state, offers these men an opportunity to utilize their conventional military skills, their staff college training, and their military leadership skills.

These former Baath party members and military officers are well versed in Iraqi politics and landscape, and proved their mettle for ISIS. They were instrumental in the quick and rapid advancement of ISIS from Syria into Iraq in 2014. Former Saddam Hussein military officers—especially with regard to security, military planning, and finance—staff most critical ranks within ISIS. This coming together of ISIS and former Baath party members is a means for the latter to adapt and keep themselves relevant to present-day Iraq, where they find their influence shrinking under a Shia-led government in Baghdad. A sudden loss of stature and privilege must have resulted in an identity crisis, and they now see ISIS as a means to getting their respect back. Given the Baath party cannot be represented in Iraqi politics and is banned by the Iraqi Constitution, the rise of ISIS came at a time when they felt cast aside and were in need of money to survive. While not all cooperated with ISIS, many did, the most prominent being the Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi Order. With the fall of Mosul to ISIS in 2014, several Baathist mid-ranking ex-military officers joined ISIS. Given their military training experience, the Baathist officers improved the group's firepower and tactical movements further. ISIS boasts that Saddam's nephew, Ayman Sabawi, and Saddam's cousin, Raad Hassan, are amongst its members.<sup>117</sup>

The politics of ISIS are based on a pragmatic understanding of Iraq and Syria, and include ethnic elements that cater to Sunni social networks and political groupings. This creates a sense of brotherhood that can extend itself to establishing structures that augment governance, the acquisition of power and influence, and long-term investment in the cause of perpetuating an Islamic caliphate. Given the stress on a caliphate based on Qur'anic legitimacy, it is useful to hinge the next section on understanding ISIS ideology.

## Ideology

Without a doubt, in order to understand ISIS and its political ambition to represent Muslims, it is pertinent to understand the ideologies that inform the group's thinking and goals. Foremost amongst the influences appears to be the fact that the group's name, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, appeals to some, if not all, Muslims. Its press releases documenting its historical, religious, and political influences, as well as the early Islamic caliphate, are close to Muslim thinking and Islam.

In the expression of its intent, ISIS is not hesitant to use brutal means like beheading or burning, as is seen in the burning death of Jordanian pilot Muadh al-Kasasbeh. Ideologically, ISIS clerics described that incident as a reciprocal measure in response to the burning of Muslim villages in drone attacks or air strikes. Yet, the brutal tactics of ISIS create the urgent need to understand the religious ideology that influences the group.<sup>118</sup>

Self-styled as representative of true Muslim believers the world over, ISIS interprets waging jihad against apostles and infidels as its primary goal. So, instead of a distant enemy like the West, which al-Qaeda focuses on, ISIS aims at purging Muslim societies in Middle East and Asia of unbelievers, including Shias, Alawites, and Yazidis. The book *Management of Savagery* by Abu Bakr Naji is believed to have informed their preferred choices for violence. Naji argues that jihad consists of brutal, sporadic violence that fills a power vacuum left by retreating Western armies. Drawing lessons from Saladin al-Ayubi and the Battle of Hatim, in which Muslims won a victory against the Christian crusaders, Naji writes that small bands of families waged jihad, which was then organized by Saladin into an organic whole, thereby creating a cumulative effect. Moreover, there was a strategic effect of timing, which is elaborated on later, in this chapter. Most ISIS justifications of violence are drawn from religious texts, which creates a dilemma for Islamic clerics. Given that examples of beheading existed in earlier Islamic theology and were used by the first caliph, Abu Bakr, who supported immolation and beheadings, it is not that easy for moderate Islamic clerics to designate ISIS as un-Islamic.<sup>119</sup> ISIS, clever in argumentation and deliberately drawing from historical examples, thus creates a legitimacy for itself by locating itself within Islamic theological traditions.

Amongst the theological traditions that influence ISIS are Salafism and the Sahwa movement in Saudi Arabia. Salafism, by itself, is nonpolitical,

though it does advocate the ‘purification of the creed,’<sup>120</sup> an idea ISIS supports. Salafism emulates the Prophet Muhammad and his first followers, *al-salaf al-salih* (pious forefathers), who usually had facial hair and believed that sharia law should be imposed. However, most Salafists are not jihadist, who are but a minority of them. While they shun politics, during the so-called Arab Spring, Salafists saw a golden opportunity to spread their ideas once the dictators fell. The basic motivation was that sharia could be imposed once they took over the politics.<sup>121</sup> Salafists, unlike Islamists, concentrate on cleansing Islam of such sects as Shiism, Sufism, etc., unilaterally asserting that they represent the true Islam. Their Islam is that which was practiced by Muhammad and his three generations of followers until the 9th century and was based on hadiths.<sup>122</sup> Everything in Islam after that is seen as un-Islamic, including nation-states, democracies, secularism, and political parties.<sup>123</sup>

As a result, ISIS, with its rejection of borders and nation-states, and its purging of the Shia, is viewed as a true embodiment of the Salafi tradition. Its adoption of core Islamic texts to inform its ideology and politics legitimizes its politics to its supporters.

However, there is another movement that might have had an influence on ISIS. The Sahwa movement, or *al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya* (Islamic Awakening), which mixes Saudi Wahhabism with the politics of the Muslim Brotherhood, has had a major impact on public discourse in the Middle East. Sahwa is loyal to the Saudi state, while critical of it, but its version of protests and religious ideas has been picked up by ISIS, especially pertaining to Wahhabism. ISIS is most influenced by the idea of *Takfirism*, the practice of one Muslim declaring another Muslim an infidel or apostate, which results in excommunication. Foremost in this is how ISIS deliberately targets Muslims, especially those who deviate from its puritanical interpretation of Islam. Perhaps playing into societal fissures already existing in places like Iraq and Syria, its primary areas of operation, ISIS fuels these sectarian divides to draw in radicalized recruits who find this extreme in-group/out-group dichotomy attractive.

This is an aspect that needs to be internalized in any counter-strategy to limit the group’s influence and hold. While ISIS may believe that playing into sectarian divides based on local knowledge is its strength, it could end up being its Achilles’ heel. ISIS markets itself as the true representative of Islam, based on Wahhabism, which is based on extreme literalism. The Wahhabi clerics decry tomb worship of saints, including Sufism, which they view as

deviating from pure Islamic practices that are based on monotheism. The two concepts of Wahhabism that has been faithfully adopted by ISIS are *wala wal bara* (loyalty and disavowal)<sup>124</sup> and tawhid. It is this Wahhabi creed of the oneness of God, which calls upon Muslims to reject fellow Muslims who deviate from this practice, and demonstrates extreme hatred and rejection of all polytheists. It is this idea of rejection, and creating a sphere where pure Islam persists, which motivates ISIS toward political statehood. This, in turn, leads to the idea of waging jihad to establish a caliphate, based on Islamic nationalism, drawn from the Sahwa movement.<sup>125</sup>

Amongst the clerics that have most influenced ISIS ideology are Jordanian cleric Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and Abu Musab al-Suri, who called for a caliphate in Iraq and encouraged small groups to carry out acts of terror in Europe. Al-Suri's 2005 book, *Da'wat al-muqawama al-Islamiyya al-'alamiyya* (The Global Islamic Resistance), diverges from Naji's 2004 book, *The Management of Savagery*. Naji's book argues that the West, faced with a war of attrition with groups like ISIS, would reveal its true face, which is prejudiced and brutal, and create the conditions for its own demise by relying on brute force and militarization. Suri's book focuses on how Muslims have been victimized across centuries. Both adhere to Wahhabism, and stress the importance of armed rebellion. Both also stress the critical importance of the establishment of a caliphate for the protection of the interest of all true Muslims.<sup>126</sup> This narrow and extremely constricted definition of who is a Muslim render most outside of Wahhabi-dominated areas susceptible to ISIS violence and purges. This assertion by ISIS that it is the true representative of Muslims—that it represents what it calls authentic Islam—brings in the notion of legitimacy.

## Legitimacy

Legitimacy is defined as “the belief that a rule, institution, or leader has the right to govern,” and that, “when shared by many individuals, legitimacy produces distinctive collective effects in society, including making collective social order more efficient, more consensual, and perhaps more just.”<sup>127</sup>

Legitimacy can be determined by three R's: Representativeness, Responsibility, and Reach. Does ISIS qualify? Who does it represent, and was it elected by the people over which it chooses to govern, or was it self-styled? Is it responsible for governance and state-building? And, what is its reach?

Does its influence extend beyond areas where it exercises physical control? Does it employ normative and material incentives to justify its rule and broaden its reach?

As far as representativeness is concerned, ISIS is mostly a self-styled caliphate. It was not established by receiving the consent of those who resided in the areas it controls, but by an imposition declared by al-Baghdadi, who connected his legitimacy as caliph to his Quraysh ancestry (the direct descendants of the Prophet), as well as his intellectual mastery of Islamic scriptures. As previously mentioned, ISIS asserts in an official pronouncement that Allah promised to make a caliphate, and that promise is the basis for the appointment of a caliph who unites the ummah and whose orders should be carried out by them.<sup>128</sup> The basis for al-Baghdadi's legitimacy lay in ISIS Shura Council's announcement of him as Caliph for all Muslims. Moreover, the Council asserts that given his Qurashi ancestry as a direct descendant of Prophet Muhammad, al-Baghdadi assumes the role of 'Imam' and 'Khalifah' for all Muslims.<sup>129</sup>

ISIS claims that the state it established is per the consensus and blessings of its Shura Council, who draw their legitimacy from their adherence to the pure Islam that ISIS propagates. In terms of actual representation, ISIS represents mostly Sunnis, especially those that give *bay'ah*, or allegiance. As stated in their pronouncement, "*Ahlu-Sunnah* [the Sunnis] are masters and are esteemed. The people of *bid'ah* [heresy] are humiliated. The *hudud* [sharia penalties] are implemented."<sup>130</sup> However, this representation cannot be strictly codified as consensual, as its hold on power and territory is based on coercion and religious imposition. Hence, there is hardly any room for debate for those who may disagree. Moreover, ISIS asserts that all Muslims everywhere are obligated to offer allegiance to al-Baghdadi, and that with the establishment of the caliphate, the legal basis for every other form of organization becomes null and void.

In the contest between secularism and Islamism, ISIS draws its legitimacy from Islamism, especially tawhid, in this case, Wahhabi Islam. Wahhabi Islam is the guiding force that informs all aspects of life for ISIS, including the state and its politics. The state that ISIS desires draws from the medieval version of Islam, including apocalyptic literature. ISIS packages its legitimacy within a strictly religious framework, asserting that its leaders have the power of Allah behind them.<sup>131</sup> In its official document, titled "This Is the Promise of Allah," the group asserts: "Allah has promised those who have

believed among you and done righteous deeds that He will surely grant them succession [to authority] upon the earth.<sup>132</sup> ISIS attempts to draw parallels to the Abbasid caliphate of Mesopotamia (now Iraq), whose early years were governed by extreme brutality, but where intellectual and creative activities grew exponentially once they established their reign. For instance, under the Sunni Abbasid caliphate in Iraq free thinkers flourished, even daring to raise questions with regard to the Qur'an, sponsored by Caliph Rashid's House of Wisdom.<sup>133</sup> Math and medicinal knowledge were encouraged. Al-Baghdadi claims similar linkages to the Abbasids, who drew their legitimacy from being descendants of the Prophet Muhammad's uncle, al-Abbas,<sup>134</sup> of the Hashemite clan of the Quraysh tribe from Mecca. ISIS, however, with its insistence on monotheism, is unlike the Abbasids who encouraged a diversity of thought, including poring over Indian books on math and Greek, Roman, and Persian philosophy texts, especially those by Caliph Harun-al-Rashid.<sup>135</sup>

This ancestral aspect is pertinent to understanding the legitimization process utilized by ISIS. Usually, Western interpretations of legitimacy are drawn from political legitimacy based on consent, beneficial consequences grounded in public approval, and democratic approval.<sup>136</sup> If we locate ISIS within that matrix, it does not enjoy any legitimacy. This misses the crucial link of the Islamic legitimization process and the context within which it is unfolding, as stated above: legitimacy drawn from direct quotations of the Qur'an, supplemented with linkages to the prophet's ancestry, as well as connections drawn to the golden age of the Abbasid caliphate. While we may despair and critique ISIS for drawing false or unilateral linkages, there is an audience that buys into that one-sided narrative. In this endeavor though, young men longing to enjoy a return of the great golden years of the Abbasids through the rule of ISIS, may be in for a shock, as is revealed by many who have managed to return after being lured by ISIS propaganda.

In an effort to claim responsibility, ISIS has undertaken governance efforts, including setting up a tax system, an education system, a military complex, a bureaucracy, and social works. For the purposes of a state, ISIS possessed territory, people, declared sovereign control, and established a caliph (ruler). It captured a huge arsenal of American weapons left behind by retreating Iraqi army soldiers, and succeeded in earning revenues by selling crude oil to the tune of \$50 million a month.<sup>137</sup> Most of this oil makes its way to the black market, selling at \$10 to \$35 a barrel. ISIS took control of some of Syria's and Iraq's oil refineries: Homs, Syria, and Kirkuk, Irbil, and Baiji,

Iraq.<sup>138</sup> ISIS supplies electricity and water, and runs internal law enforcement for business owners for \$20 for two months.<sup>139</sup> A list of the financial assets of ISIS can be found in a report by its finance ministry, the Diwan al-Rakaaez.<sup>140</sup> ISIS projects its social responsibility to its target population by running schools, hospitals, social welfare efforts, housing, law enforcement, the judiciary (based on sharia), and providing salaries. ISIS issues birth certificates, runs a vaccination campaign, and provides education that includes math and religious texts.<sup>141</sup> It has a special ministry dealing with war victims and martyrs and their families. It picks up garbage, manages traffic, and its territory is divided into wilayats or provinces, each run by a governor.

Through the social media campaigns and propaganda, ISIS expands its reach to millions across the world.<sup>142</sup> Amongst the terrorist groups, ISIS has proved the most efficient when it comes to utilizing the internet for propaganda, attracting resources and recruits, as well as spreading its ideology to its target audiences. Its Al Hayat Media Center in Mosul develops apps, such as Fajr al-Bashaer or “Dawn of Good Tidings,” which enable users to receive news on ISIS activities and operations in Iraq and Syria. It also has online magazines like *Dabiq* and *Islamic State (IS) Report*, showcasing ISIS education efforts, ideology, and social works in sleek designs.<sup>143</sup> The group even ran an online store selling T-shirts and hoodies. Online reports, press releases, and magazines are simultaneously published in English, Turkish, Dutch, French, German, Indonesian, and Russian.<sup>144</sup> ISIS videos on beheadings, square-based justice, and military training are always played to the background musical recitation of Qur’anic verses to cleverly provide these brutal actions with religious sanction and legitimacy. This includes videos like the *Flames of War*,<sup>145</sup> as well as ones made specifically for a Western audience, like *The Chosen Few of Different Lands*, in which a Canadian ISIS fighter, Andre Poulin, is seen making a pitch for young Western Muslim youths to join ISIS. Poulin, identified as a martyr by ISIS, asserted that his life in Canada was good, but he still decided to join ISIS—a clever strategy on the part of ISIS to counter analyses coming from the West that most Western young men and women join ISIS because they are either unemployed or unhappy in their Western surroundings.<sup>146</sup>

While recent targeted counterinsurgency (COIN) and CT operations in Mosul have limited the social media reach of ISIS, especially since the death of several of its social media leaders, the change in its internet strategy and its success in drawing recruits should be subject to in-depth analysis, as these

aspects could be adopted by other terrorist organizations. This draws us to the critical aspect of the ‘dynamics of allegiance and recruitment pattern’ within ISIS.

## Dynamics of Allegiance and Recruitment

The issue of allegiance as a recruitment tool for ISIS falls under three categories. First is *bay'ah*, or allegiance, to al-Baghdadi as the caliph and ISIS as the caliphate. This category is locally, regionally, and internationally attractive for drawing potential recruits. The second category is sectarianism, mostly drawing upon the Sunni communities across the Middle East, and mostly preferring Sunni Arabs in leadership positions. The third category draws on the idea of the Muslim ummah as ISIS attempts to expand into regions including Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America. This broad categorization aims to take advantage of Muslim recruits from countries like India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Kyrgyzstan, the U.S., Canada, Germany, France, etc., to wage jihad in distant lands outside of the caliphate.

Giving allegiance to al-Baghdadi is mandatory once a person or group joins ISIS. Moreover, ISIS projects al-Baghdadi as instrumental in bringing in the day of honor and dignity, thereby raising Muslims across the world from their humiliations and freeing them from being ruled by the ‘vilest of rulers.’ Al-Baghdadi, as the caliph, unites the ummah and obligates all true believers to offer their allegiance to him. Given his qualities, including scholarship, wisdom, sanction of elders, and last but not least, his Quraysh descent, al-Baghdadi creates a dynamic of allegiance that is ordained by religious authority. This aspect is discussed in detail in the third issue of *Dabiq*, subtitled “A Call to Hijrah,” where ISIS calls upon all Muslims to move to Iraq and Syria (the caliphate) in a journey similar to that of Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE.<sup>147</sup>

The second category involves an appeal to all Sunnis (*Ahlu-Sunnah*) to unite and fight against the *bid'ah* (heretics), which includes Shias, Alawites, and Sufis. The core of ISIS support across Iraq and Syria is drawn from Sunni tribes, who saw their influence decrease after the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime, as well as his Baath Party members and armed officers who lost power post-2003.<sup>148</sup> ISIS utilized these Sunni anxieties under Shia governance in Iraq, by making center-stage the fight against what it termed the heretics (Shias).<sup>149</sup>

The final category is an attempt by ISIS to go beyond the Middle East and fulfill ambitions to expand their influence to other parts of the world through the idea of the ummah. In July 2014, ISIS published a map outlining its plans for the next five years in which it aimed to spread to India, Bangladesh, Burma, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Malaysia, among others. For instance, in its online magazine, *Dabiq*, ISIS asserts that “sharia alone will rule Africa,”<sup>150</sup> criticizes al-Qaeda in Waziristan, Pakistan, and pledges to expand to Libya, Yemen, Algeria, Bangladesh, India.

Have these three categories of allegiance worked to draw recruits to ISIS? While recruitment from different regions has varied, around 27,000 to 30,000 foreign fighters have traveled to the caliphate, attracted by both religious aspirations and the draw of money.<sup>151</sup> ISIS is a well-resourced terrorist group, with an annual budget of \$2 billion.<sup>152</sup> Its soldiers draw a salary and are compensated with housing and other benefits. For example, engineers working in the oil fields during the time when ISIS held territory earned anywhere between \$250 and \$1,200 a day, depending on their skills. The online recruiting of women is organized under platforms like *Al-Khansa'a*,<sup>153</sup> named after a devout poetess who lived in the Prophet’s times, and who, after losing her four sons in battle against Persia, stated that she was proud to be the mother of martyrs.<sup>154</sup> As of December 2015, Tunisia sent the largest number of foreign fighters (6,000), followed by Saudi Arabia (2,500), Russia (2,400), Turkey (2,100), Jordan (2,000), France (1,700), the UK (760), and Germany (760).<sup>155</sup> Significantly, recent data has emerged that indicates that Trinidad has now become fertile ground for ISIS recruitment, with Trinidadian citizen Abu Sa’d at-Trinidad being the face of it, and about 125 Trinidadians joining ISIS. The growth of the Salafi influence on the island could increase the attraction to ISIS.<sup>156</sup> ISIS also has drawn recruits from North America, including the U.S. (100)<sup>157</sup> and Canada (150). In understanding the dynamics of allegiance and recruitment across the three categories, it becomes clear that all three categories have a cumulative effect on ISIS expansion of its ideology and bonding fostered by religion. In this, context and time is of paramount significance in terms of both the ISIS strategy and an operational game plan.

## Timing

Timing is vital for strategic success. ISIS arrived at a time in 2014 when Iraq was suffering from a crisis of sectarian divides between the Shia-led

government in Baghdad and the Sunni majority in the provinces. The Arab Spring had weakened Middle East states and enabled extremist groups to rise against the dictatorships in Egypt, Syria, Libya, and Tunisia. Nearby, Jordan and Saudi Arabia tightened civilian control for fear of similar uprisings. In Syria in particular, in the name of the Arab Spring, terror groups like al-Nusra (a sub-group of al-Qaeda) were getting funds to fight Bashar al-Assad. AQI, with its leader killed in Iraq in 2006, was regrouping and consolidating in rebel-held territory in Syria, where al-Assad's forces had little say or were looking away. With the disintegration of Arab regimes in Libya, Egypt, and Syria, radical Islamist groups filled power vacuums—not the moderate groups hoped for by the West. Moreover, the fear of instability that the Arab Spring brought, due to people demanding more freedoms, motivated regimes like those in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia to use cash incentives to try to buy off their citizens for fear that political Islam might take root in post-Arab Spring regimes.

ISIS entered Iraq at a time when the Americans exited. This left a power vacuum and incapacitated the Iraqi army, which was made up of Sunni personnel, stationed in Sunni cities like Mosul and Kirkuk, and who, having suffered under al-Maliki, were afraid of fighting ISIS as a Sunni-based group. ISIS quickly turned Mosul into its headquarters in Iraq and the place from which al-Baghdadi announced his caliphate. In Syria, the rebel forces had, at that time, driven the Syrian government forces out of places like Raqqa and Aleppo, which in turn fell to ISIS. The simultaneous impact of popular uprisings, lawlessness, weakened regimes, and sectarian divides, galvanized ISIS to declare its state and offer stability and a sense of purpose in an otherwise chaotic landscape.

The question that arises in this context is: why study and understand these six strategic dimensions from the standpoint of USSOCOM or for the larger purpose of an effective long-term counter-extremism operation, to include COIN and CT? The answer was provided by Major General Michael Nagata, former commander of Special Operations Command Central, who stated that in order to defeat groups like ISIS, one must attack the ideas that propagate their version of reality. But, in order to be successful in that mission, ISIS ideology and attraction has to be understood to highlight both its strengths and its weaknesses. “We do not understand the movement, and until we do, we are not going to defeat it. We have not defeated the idea. We do not even understand the idea,”<sup>158</sup> he said in December 2014.

Most importantly, he went on to state that, “I want to engage in a long-term conversation to understand a commonly held view of the psychological, emotional and cultural power of IS,” expressing concern that ISIS evokes a magnetic charm for young Muslim men from a particular section of society, looking for a banner to rally around.<sup>159</sup>

U.S. efforts to arm the Syrian rebels against al-Assad, al-Nusra, and ISIS—at a cost of \$500 million—did not result in the success commanders and planners had envisioned.<sup>160</sup> Rebel fighters were required to fight in Syria on behalf of U.S. CT efforts, especially when al-Nusra, the al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, attacked them. The complexity of fighting three different foes on the same battlefield could have been asking for too much from the Syrian military graduates that were part of U.S. military’s training program. Most of them proved inadequate in the context of motivated, religiously inspired, and locally trained groups like ISIS and al-Nusra. Critically, the American-backed rebel groups, like the Syrian Revolutionaries Front, ended up fighting multiple fronts: al-Assad’s forces, ISIS, and al-Nusra. The task proved arduous, given that al-Assad’s forces targeted the rebel forces, weakening them, before they then had to fight off ISIS.<sup>161</sup>

The complexity of the cultural, social, and political conditions in Syria and Iraq create risks and obstacles that hinder operational clarity. For one, when AQI chief al-Zarqawi was killed in 2006, no one predicted that within a span of eight years a group like ISIS would occupy land and establish an extremist state in Iraq and Syria. For another, the sectarian divides and inclination to support a fundamentalist form of Islam amongst large population swathes indicate that such groups will continue to fester.<sup>162</sup> We know that ISIS aims to spread its sectarian ideology to Muslim-majority countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, as well as to the large Muslim population in India. Yet, in the last three years since that goal was articulated, the spread of ISIS ideology has not overtaken civil discourse in these countries, and Muslim organizations within them have boldly declared ISIS a terror group. The structural, political, social, and cultural conditions that have been historically rooted in countries like Indonesia, India, and Malaysia have created a safety net against ISIS ideology. Perhaps Iraq and Syria lack that broad-based, representative, political, and religious structure that could create a similar safety net. Following chapters in the monograph will deal substantially with the cases of Bangladesh, Burma, India, and Indonesia, highlighting the limitations of the group’s ideological

appeal and reach, and why they will remain territorially limited, despite an illusion of global appeal.

Significantly, ISIS is not the first terrorist/insurgent group to run a government by claiming territory. Parallel governments have been set up by insurgent groups in India like the Nagas and the Naxalites; in Burma by the Kachins, Karens, Was, and Shans; in the Philippines by the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF); in Colombia by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC); and in Sri Lanka by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. There are several more examples of non-state armed groups (NSAGs) occupying territory and running a parallel, illicit economy, similar to ISIS. Usually, these are spaces where the writ of the state is weak and access is difficult. ISIS gained prominence in this regard because it successfully occupied major cities in Iraq and Syria, and engaged in conventional battles with state forces. Hence, the modus operandi of ISIS on the battlefield is a departure from the past, where NSAGs usually used unconventional battle tactics and guerilla warfare. However, there is the danger of ISIS resorting to unconventional tactics (terror strikes across the world) once it loses ground in Syria and Iraq, for two main purposes: to keep the movement alive and visible, and to draw in recruits and financial resources. We have to account for “ISIS diaspora”<sup>163</sup> in future plans for combating violent extremism.

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## Chapter 2. Dynamics of Allegiance, Ideological Propaganda Tools, and Recruitment Patterns

One of the primary tasks assigned to USSOCOM is to mitigate and minimize the impact of extremist groups like ISIS,<sup>164</sup> not only in the Middle East, but across regions like Asia and Africa.<sup>165</sup> This task is accomplished with the help of partner nations including Iraq, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Morocco, Somalia, Cameroon, and Nigeria, amongst others,<sup>166</sup> where ISIS is present and/or aims to expand.<sup>167</sup> In April 2016, then U.S. President Barack Obama announced the deployment of 250 U.S. SOF to Syria to augment the existing 300 in the battle against ISIS, with a focus on training and providing critical support to local forces fighting ISIS.<sup>168</sup> The Syrian Democratic Forces, a U.S.-backed coalition, welcomed the infusion of U.S. SOF with spokesperson Talal Silo stating that, “Any support they offer is positive but we hope there will be greater support.”<sup>169</sup> U.S. SOF continue to play a simultaneous, major role in the fight against ISIS in Iraq, with on-the-ground advising and assisting of Iraqi forces.<sup>170</sup>

In the fight against ISIS, Syrian Arab volunteers have an advantage, as the areas of conflict are largely inhabited by Arab populations. This ethnic linkage makes it easier to not only carry out ground attacks against ISIS, but also gather intelligence. However, this concept of Syrian Arab volunteers has not been lost on ISIS. As mentioned in chapter 1, al-Iraqi said as much to a rebel commander in a telephone call between the two.<sup>171</sup>

Hence, as Sun Tzu stated centuries ago, the enemy is always thinking, adapting, and evolving, and “supreme importance in war is to attack the enemy’s strategy.”<sup>172</sup> In the fight against ISIS, it is critical to understand the logic driving the group, which is opposite to the logic driving the forces fighting it. On the one hand, the logic of the group’s strategy is to utilize a mixture of ideology, religious authenticity, social networks based on ethnicity and sect, political legitimacy, anger, and fear to realize two potentially distinct goals: perpetuate their ideas, and perpetuate their presence (a defeat in Raqqa does not mean a defeat of the apocalyptic idea).<sup>173</sup> On the other hand, the logic of the forces fighting ISIS is that this is solely a terrorist organization

lacking popular support, and as a result, cannot sustain itself over the long haul in the face of the multiple specialized forces fighting it.<sup>174</sup>

Yet, a puzzle that confronts the U.S. is the skill ISIS has attracting allegiances from across the world, coupled with the rapid rate of recruitment that it registered in the years following its 2014 formation.<sup>175</sup> This is a puzzle worth deconstructing with questions begging answers below.

- Who are these men and women who are attracted to ISIS?
- What are the reasons for this attraction?
- Is it purely materialistic, or religious, or a combination of both?
- Are there region-wide variations across the globe in the patterns of allegiances and recruitment to ISIS?
- And, if there are, do these region-wide variations matter to the U.S. SOF mission?

Amongst a population of more than 1.8 billion Muslims worldwide,<sup>176</sup> why is it that only between 27,000 and 31,000 have actually traveled to the caliphate, and why have more traveled from some regions than others?<sup>177</sup> It is important to remember that per ISIS ideological pronouncements examined in the previous chapter, the declaration of the caliphate obligates all true Muslims to travel to it and give allegiance to al-Baghdadi. Yet, a majority of Muslims, including the Sunni Muslims revered by ISIS, scoff at the idea of the ISIS caliphate—millions have stayed away and refused to recognize it.<sup>178</sup>

Keeping in mind the U.S. SOF mission of combating violent extremism, especially groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda in its regional variations, this chapter analyzes how ISIS institutes allegiances with its cadres and target populations. In this, the role of ideological indoctrination, economic and social factors, promised future benefits of recruitment, participatory political organizational structures within ISIS, and elements of coercive persuasion are specifically examined. In terms of allegiance, the chapter highlights how social connections (shared living in similar circumstances), bonding (elements of empowerment by being part of a group), a shared vision of how things should be in Muslim societies, and finally, fear and intimidation combine to play a role in establishing allegiance to ISIS. Based on these elements, the chapter then investigates the pattern of recruitment to ISIS.

Understanding the elements that go into allegiance to ISIS and social networking, both real and virtual, as well as its capability to draw in future recruits, equips USSOCOM with the knowledge to break the cycle of violence

that penetrates societies in Iraq and Syria.<sup>179</sup> While it is not easy to completely destroy groups like ISIS and the religion-based ideas that they project (there is always another radical group ready to replace it, as well as a receptive audience), it is pertinent that the social structures that enable such groups to flourish are encouraged to change and adapt.<sup>180</sup> Examples of similar, if not identical, cases of violent groups adapting to changed circumstances include FARC, who agreed to join a peace process with the Colombian government in 2016,<sup>181</sup> and the Nagas in India who signed a peace agreement with the Indian government in 2015, nearly 97 years after they formed a resistance group.<sup>182</sup>

Unlike ISIS, insurgent groups like the MNLF in the Philippines utilize local ethnic and religious bonding, social networks, and local causes to draw in recruits and finances.<sup>183</sup> ISIS, however, focuses its rationale globally, asserting that it is the caliphate that Muslims aspire to experience in their lifetime. ISIS unilaterally demands a pledge of allegiance for the simple fact that they are the self-styled, religiously ordained caliphate, following in the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad and the first two caliphs who followed him.

## Dynamics of Allegiance

As mentioned previously, the dynamics of allegiance can be separated into the three categories highlighted in the previous chapter. First is the concept of bay'ah, or allegiance, to al-Baghdadi as the caliph and ISIS as the caliphate. As mentioned, this category is locally, regionally, and internationally attractive in drawing potential recruits. The second category is sectarianism, which mostly draws upon the Sunni communities across the Middle East, and means mostly preferring Sunni Arabs in leadership positions. The third category utilizes the idea of the Muslim ummah in an effort to expand into regions in Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America, taking advantage of Muslim recruits from countries like India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Kyrgyzstan, the U.S., Canada, Germany, France, etc., to wage jihad in distant lands outside of the caliphate.

Besides these three overarching categories, there are three subcategories of allegiance. First is the concept of “brothers all,” which sells the idea that once allegiance is given to al-Baghdadi, every Muslim is a brother, shares hopes, sacrifices, and joys, and can receive redemption. The second subcategory is forming regional alliances with other terror groups, alliances permeated on the overarching idea that al-Baghdadi is the supreme leader.

The final subcategory is the offering of incentives to men who join, including money, female slaves,<sup>184</sup> and stature within a close-knit group. Any or all can lure in recruits.<sup>185</sup>

## Brothers All

In the discourse that ISIS projects, the notion that members are brothers under Allah is extremely powerful. This kind of social bonding can be a powerful draw when one lives in a conflict zone where insecurity prevails, or in conditions in host or home societies where one feels marginalized and/or a sense of imagined or real racism.<sup>186</sup> For example, ISIS recruits from Western Europe with preexisting criminal records had done jail time before they left for Syria, sentences they often portrayed as racial targeting.<sup>187</sup> These individuals included the mastermind of the Paris attacks, Belgian national Abdelhamid Abaaoud and his fellow Belgian co-conspirators, Samy Amimour, and Salah and Brahim Abdeslam.<sup>188</sup> It is often believed that it is in these jails that they start getting radicalized or turn to radical Islam.<sup>189</sup> Moreover, the turn to radical Islam is often found in children born of immigrant Muslim parents. More often than not, they do not reflect the gratitude felt by their parents for getting an opportunity to migrate to better lives in the West, which the parents perceive as improving not only their financial condition but also their stature back home amongst kith and kin. Second-generation Muslims (born in the West) often find themselves in circumstances that do not reflect the advantages of their peers, whose forefathers are Western. While their national identity is either European or North American, they do not feel

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accepted or validated, and continue to be viewed as immigrants because of racism or Islamophobia, which are prevalent in these societies.<sup>190</sup> This renders them susceptible to the Salafi version of Islam and to groups like ISIS. As a representation of revolt, they form purposeful identities both against their parents' attitude of gratitude in circumstances where they may have themselves

faced racial discrimination, and as a religious platform through which to broadcast their aggressive identities. ISIS plays into this psyche perfectly

by indicating that, within the caliphate, all true Muslims humiliated in the West will have their dignity and self-worth restored.

In the UK, Muslim converts have shown a desire to join ISIS. This includes Siddhartha Dhar, a.k.a. Saiful Islam or Abu Rumaysah, who was born a Hindu, but converted to Islam in his teens. He was arrested in the UK on charges of supporting terrorism, and when out on bail in 2014, escaped to Syria with his family. He was part of the al-Muhajiroun network, and expressed his radical views openly. When ISIS established the caliphate, Dhar stated, “The caliphate [a state governed in accordance with Islamic law, or sharia] is a dream for all Muslims worldwide ... Now that we have this caliphate I think you’ll see many Muslims globally seeing it as an opportunity for the Qur’an to be realized.”<sup>191</sup> Significantly, between 2001 and 2010, new converts to Islam formed 31 percent of British jihadists.<sup>192</sup> It is pertinent to note that most were homegrown terrorists and attended a higher education institution. Yet, with their perceived home circumstances,<sup>193</sup> the desire to live in, and perpetuate, a sharia-based system and the ‘brotherhood’ logic based on Islam appealed to them.

If one looks at the data, out of a population of 4.7 million French Muslims, 1,700 of Muslim French nationals joined ISIS as of May 2015.<sup>194</sup> Out of 4.7 million German Muslims, 760 joined ISIS as of May 2015.<sup>195</sup> In the UK, with a population of 3 million Muslims, 760 joined ISIS by that same date.<sup>196</sup> Most who joined were radicalized by online discussions and their need to belong to something purposeful and far more radical than their own Muslim communities where the majority shunned ISIS.<sup>197</sup> It is important to note that for most ISIS recruits, Islam is not simply a religion, but a socio-political system. Hence, the ISIS caliphate, run on sharia law and where sovereignty is with Allah, appeals to them. It offers young men a sense of purpose and redemption, especially those in their teens who are suspect at home for their views and possibly have been convicted of crimes and terror acts. The offer of dignity from ISIS, in these circumstances, can have a liberating effect. Moreover, the lives of the Prophet Muhammad and the two caliphs who succeeded him were plagued by violent battles in the quest to establish Islam. ISIS deliberately projects to their targeted audience that they are simply following that path, until sharia law is imposed, everywhere Muslims live. ISIS documents assert that for the sacrifices made to impose the caliphate worldwide, salvation will be gained in heaven. Muslim converts, especially in the West, lack the magnetic pull of an ISIS brotherhood and emotional

rewards within their own societies.<sup>198</sup> Hence, ISIS statements, like the one quoted in the last chapter about the establishment of the caliphate and pledging allegiance to al-Baghdadi, resonate with them.

## Regional Alliances

ISIS asserts that once the caliphate is established, it becomes the religious obligation of all Islamic groups to offer their allegiance to it, as mandated by the Qur'an. Anyone failing to do so is working against Allah's wishes.<sup>199</sup> One of the major terrorist groups to give allegiance is Boko Haram from Nigeria. Its leader, Abu Bakr Shekau, pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi, stating:

[W]e announce our allegiance to the Caliph of the Muslims ... and will hear and obey in times of difficulty and prosperity, in hardship and ease ... We call on Muslims everywhere to pledge allegiance to the Caliph and support him, as obedience to Allah and as their application of the absent duty of the era.<sup>200</sup>

The allegiance given by Boko Haram assumes significance as it is the first major terror group, outside of the Middle East, to do so. Significantly, though, after Shekau pledged his allegiance, ISIS replaced him in August 2016 with Abu Musab al-Barnawi, the son of Boko Haram founder Muhammad Yusuf. This could be due to ideological rifts, as well as the fact that Shekau's appetite for extreme violence went overboard, even for a hard core extremist group like ISIS. His attacks on mosques and Muslim-owned civic facilities turned the ranks against him.<sup>201</sup> ISIS realized that it was best to replace the impulsive Shekau with someone they could easily direct from Iraq and Syria.<sup>202</sup> Shekau, for his part, could have been motivated to declare allegiance to ISIS to increase his own influence within a fractious rank, efforts which then backfired on him.

Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, Egypt's most active and visible terror group, pledged its allegiance to ISIS in November 2014, stating: "In accordance with the teachings of the Prophet, we announce our allegiance to the caliphate, and call on Muslims everywhere to do the same."<sup>203</sup> After declaring allegiance, it changed its name to the Sinai Province (SP). Operating mainly in North Sinai, it aims to spread to other parts of Egypt including Cairo and Giza. The group's presence could destabilize the border between Egypt and Israel, especially since terror attacks have struck Sheikh Zuweid, not far

from the border.<sup>204</sup> The Egyptian military alleges that SP is procuring arms from the Gaza Strip.<sup>205</sup> With ISIS collaboration, SP has repeatedly attacked Egypt's security services, as well as civilians. Critically, the allegiance to ISIS offered the group territory in Iraq and Syria to train and establish expertise, especially for terror attacks and online propaganda. SP's online presence is apparent with several propaganda videos aimed at Egyptian audiences including the Muslim Brotherhood. SP claimed responsibility for downing Russian Kogalymavia Metrojet flight 9268, killing all of its 224 passengers and crew in October 2015.<sup>206</sup>

Despite the pledges by Boko Haram and SP, ISIS has failed to secure allegiances from other major terrorist groups, including al-Qaeda and its affiliates in Arabia, the Maghreb, and the Indian subcontinent,<sup>207</sup> or Ansar al-sharia in Libya, or its allies in the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council. Neither has ISIS secured any allegiance from the Taliban, either in Afghanistan or Pakistan.<sup>208</sup> Terror factions with stated allegiances in Algeria, Libya, and Saudi Arabia are unknown entities or have little influence, though their allegiances serve the purposes of al-Baghdadi to claim that ISIS is expanding its sway in these regions. Some ex-leaders from the Taliban<sup>209</sup> have given their allegiance, but that is more symbolic than substantial given they have little influence within their original group.

In response to the declaration of the ISIS caliphate, al-Qaeda leader al-Zawahiri quickly announced the establishment of al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) on 3 September 2014.<sup>210</sup> This Pakistan-based al-Qaeda affiliate would be responsible for activities in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Burma. The timing and al-Zawahiri's pledge that AQIS will expand an Islamic caliphate to these areas is a direct response to ISIS expansion. However, a declaration amounts to nothing if the Muslim populations in these countries reject these efforts, as has been the case in Indonesia, India, Bangladesh, and Burma.

For the success of the U.S. SOF mission in the fight against ISIS, besides lethal firepower, gaining an understanding of these Islamic concepts, as well as patterns of allegiance, is vital for spotting those susceptible to the packaged and advertised concepts of ISIS. More importantly, in tracing the patterns of allegiance, vital intelligence for mission success is captured.

## Personal and Community-Based Incentives for Recruitment

ISIS recruitment is aided by several incentives, namely ideological and religious ones: a shared linear sense of anger at some of the conditions affecting Muslims worldwide, the impact of 9/11, a lack of purpose and meaning in their current lives, and the fear of siege in a situation where poor intelligence leads to overt generalizations about Muslim communities. All these factors can lead to recruitment, especially from the pool of Muslim youths living in the West.<sup>211</sup> Most of the recruits from Europe and North America fall within the 15 to 25 age group—an age when young men and/or women are looking for meaning and are easily manipulated by someone older. ISIS projects to these youths that it understands their lack of social bonding in their physical world, and that they turn to the internet for it instead. How do online ISIS recruiters know that these young men or women are vulnerable or susceptible to recruitment? By the very fact that they are visiting recruitment sites, not just once out of genuine curiosity, but time and again to engage

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in online conversations. Then, in their conversations with potential recruits, ISIS recruiters let them watch one-sided videos of discrimination or violence against fellow Muslims in Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Kashmir. Videos of the Abu Ghraib prison scandal of intentional torture and sexual abuse of Iraqi detainees by U.S. military and intelligence personnel were passed around for potential recruits to watch.<sup>212</sup> This can impact a young mind, whose logic and reasoning power may be limited compared to someone much older, or who may be unable to fathom that

U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld took responsibility for the prison abuse and that several investigations into the scandal were conducted by the U.S. Army.<sup>213</sup> Videos of similar torture or beheadings by terror groups—for instance, the gruesome killings of Nicholas Berg, Daniel Pearl, and James Foley—are then labeled as justified as they were conducted in the name of Allah and are compared to stories of Prophet Muhammad engaged in similar acts.

It is important to realize that recruits join ISIS for different reasons. For instance, the largest number of foreign recruits are from Russia and the

Middle East, including Tunisia (6,000), Saudi Arabia (2,500), Russia (2,400), Turkey (2,100), and Jordan (2,000).<sup>214</sup> If one analyzes the reasons, besides monetary incentives, the reward of several wives and slaves could be a powerful draw for men.<sup>215</sup> The lure of possessing female slaves was expressed in an ISIS video, where viewers could see ISIS members discussing the price of each woman.<sup>216</sup> Some of the other reasons include human emotions like longing for purpose, adventure, friendship.<sup>217</sup>

Besides, most ISIS recruits from the Middle East believe that their own countries are not faithfully replicating the sharia laws laid down in the Qur'an or following the hadith literally, especially as laid down by Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab. Thus, they gravitate toward the packaged and advertised concepts of ISIS. For those coming from the former Soviet Republics (4,700), the reasons range from the draw of monetary incentives, to already existing criminality, as well as a desire to live under sharia.<sup>218</sup> The sense of alienation that Muslim youths may perceive and feel in the West may not be felt by youths from Central Asian nations such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan—all Muslim-majority states. Yet, given online recruiting and targeted propaganda by ISIS, some of these youths may feel compelled to join ISIS for its promise of redemption, as well as revenge for the perceived wrongs done to Muslims worldwide. In this, the concept of ummah plays a role, especially to those who are not deeply rooted in their own societies and are looking for bonding and a sense of adventure.

For youths from the West being recruited into ISIS, three factors play a major role. First is the perception that Western societies never accept them as fully their own, and will always view their identity as British Muslims or American Muslims with suspicion. So, their loyalty to the UK—or the United States—is suspect. Being born British or American does not automatically result in full acceptance. The second factor is that their families and communities, within which these youths feel a sense of alienation, fail to notice the signs, especially when young Muslim men and women suddenly turn more religious and start wearing signs of their growing religiosity. Usually, when their sons or daughters are found guilty of plotting or carrying out a terror attack, parents despair, stating that he or she was just a juvenile. Part of the youths' radicalization can also inadvertently happen within the family, especially when parents may debate or discuss issues like racism and minority treatment in the West. Youths listening in on their parents may

feel compelled to do something, especially those who face discrimination in their own social settings such as their school. However, when they find that their parents or their mosques refuse to engage in topics like jihad and discourage them in their growing radicalized views, they turn to the only source available—the internet—and work out their own, usually extremist, brand of Islam.<sup>219</sup>

Once these youths from several regions join ISIS, they go through physical training and indoctrination, and the brotherhood bond is augmented, inspiring them to carry out more violence—all justified in the name of Allah. Even the rape of slaves is justified and legitimized by ISIS as being sanctioned in the Qur'an. This offers redemption and legitimization.

ISIS divides men into different regional groups by their ethnicity. For example, the group's Russian-language media center, Furat Media, distributes propaganda that utilizes voices from the region to draw in more recruits. In an ISIS video, Abu Amin, a 60-year-old native of Osh, Kyrgyzstan, indicates that he and his family traveled to the caliphate to seek redemption. He goes on to state in his native Uzbek language that the caliphate is a peaceful place to raise one's children. Similarly, Marat Maulenov, speaking in his native Kazakh language, calls upon Kazakh families to travel to the caliphate.<sup>220</sup> Given conditions of corruption, and minority persecution in Central Asia, ISIS propaganda videos prioritize social justice within the caliphate, especially appealing to those who suffer from unemployment and poverty.

Family values may have a special appeal, although it has not been appealing enough to the 66 million Muslims who live in Central Asia. The data below reflects ISIS recruitment from the region during its peak years between 2014-2015. Accessing recruitment patterns during the peak years of an insurgency/terrorism, helps establish a credible picture of its appeal to potential recruits. Azerbaijan, with a population of 9.8 million in 2015,<sup>221</sup> saw about 200 join ISIS.<sup>222</sup> Kazakhstan, with a population of 17.4 million in 2015,<sup>223</sup> saw 300 join ISIS.<sup>224</sup> Kyrgyzstan, with a population of 5.72 million in 2015,<sup>225</sup> saw 500 join ISIS.<sup>226</sup> Tajikistan, with a population of 8.2 million in 2015,<sup>227</sup> saw 386 join ISIS.<sup>228</sup> Uzbekistan, with a population of 29.2 million in 2015,<sup>229</sup> saw 500 join ISIS.<sup>230</sup> While the recruitment to ISIS appears to be high from Central Asia, it is useful to comprehend that millions have rejected ISIS, and even though sympathetic to Wahhabi Islam, at least do not view the caliphate as legitimate.

Similarly, ISIS has established a Khorasan group, which launched its first attack on India on 9 March 2017, bombing a train in the state of Madhya Pradesh. This India-based ISIS group consisted of nine members, mostly from Lucknow and Kanpur in India, but were alleged to have been directed by an ISIS operative in Syria.<sup>231</sup> The states of Kerala and Assam are viewed as targets of ISIS recruitment.<sup>232</sup> ISIS released a video in 2016 that featured an Indian Muslim ISIS recruit who pledged to expand the caliphate to India and liberate its Muslim population.<sup>233</sup>

The presence of ISIS, its propaganda, the hysteria surrounding foreign recruits into ISIS, and the multiple terror attacks orchestrated by ‘lone wolves’ who have pledged their allegiance to or were directed by ISIS<sup>234</sup> give the impression that the group is spreading like cancer. Putting the recruitment pattern in perspective, however, millions of Muslims continue to live their lives in lands described as kuffar by ISIS. ISIS is unable to reach generations beyond the 30s and 40s for the most part. This is despite the group’s claim that a true Muslim’s obligation is to either travel to the caliphate or to join it virtually:

The legality of all emirates, groups, states, and organizations, becomes null by the expansion of the khilāfah’s authority and arrival of its troops to their areas ... Listen to your khalifah and obey him. Support your state, which grows every day.<sup>235</sup>

Moreover, despite the claim by ISIS that its goal is to establish a global caliphate, most of its top leaders are local (Iraqis) or confined to Syrians and Jordanians. There is resistance within ISIS to giving decision-making power to foreign members. They can be utilized for propaganda in their respective regions to draw in recruits or carry out virtual terror, but they cannot be seen amongst the top ISIS executive or Shura Council. For instance, AQI, the precursor to ISIS, faced stiff resistance from local Iraqis unhappy with the growing number of foreign fighters, including al-Zarqawi, who was a Jordanian. Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, who became AQI leader after al-Zarqawi’s death, issued a statement in 2007 that foreign fighters in AQI numbered only 200.<sup>236</sup>

As mentioned earlier, USSOCOM core activities include CT, COIN, and FID. FID includes protection “against subversion, lawlessness, insurgency, terrorism, and other threats to their internal security, and stability, and legitimacy.”<sup>237</sup> U.S. SOF also are tasked with military information support

operations (MISO), which includes “conveying selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and ultimately the behavior of foreign governments, organizations, groups, and individuals in a manner favorable to the originator’s objectives.”<sup>238</sup> To further this goal, it is critical for U.S. SOF to understand the dynamics of allegiance to ISIS, as well as the group’s recruitment patterns.

The key questions that are explored in the forthcoming chapters are: what are the limits of ISIS ideology, and why have some of the major Muslim countries seen such low levels of ISIS recruitment despite efforts by ISIS to engage with them? As of 2010, there were 1.6 billion Muslims in the world, with a combined population of 257 million in the Middle East.<sup>239</sup> Indonesia has the largest Muslim population with 209.1 million, followed by India and Pakistan, with 176.2 million and 167.4 million, respectively.<sup>240</sup> Bangladesh has 148.6 million Muslims, and Malaysia has a population of 19.3 million Muslims. Yet, recruitment to ISIS from these countries has been low according to official accounts.<sup>241</sup> The following chapters will unpack the reasons, as well as offer a futuristic perspective on whether, despite its limits today, ISIS ideology will spread, and if so, what realistically can be done to limit its influence.

## Chapter 3. Bangladesh and Burma: Will ISIS Spread Its Wings?

**B**angladesh and Burma are strategically two of the most significant countries in South and Southeast Asia. They share a nearly 170-mile border.<sup>242</sup> One issue that affects both countries is the Rohingya conflict, which spans the Bangladesh-Burma border. The Rohingya are an ethnic minority in Burma, and are believed to be descendants of Arab traders. Burma, however, views them as illegal immigrants and denies them any citizenship rights.<sup>243</sup> There are about 1.4 million Rohingya in the Rakhine state of Burma and hundreds of thousands live in Bangladesh without any documentation. Interestingly, Burma's Nobel Peace Prize winner and pro-democracy activist, Aung San Suu Kyi, and her political party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), have done little to salvage the situation of the Rohingya. Instead, she indicated that the violence in the Rakhine state against the Rohingya was because the Buddhists "are worried about the fact that they are shrinking as a Rakhine population percentage-wise."<sup>244</sup>

In the 2015 Burma elections, NLD did not allow a single Muslim candidate. There are concerns that the poor conditions prevalent in Burma for the Rohingya Muslim community make it fertile ground for ISIS recruitment and propaganda. Malaysia's CT chief, Ayob Khan Mydin Pitchay, cautioned that ISIS fighters may travel to Rakhine state to fight for the Rohingya cause.<sup>245</sup> Nearly 500,000 Rohingya have fled Burma over the years and now reside in Bangladesh.<sup>246</sup> In April 2017, Burma and Bangladesh agreed to begin talks to address the issue of 65,000 Rohingya that fled Rakhine state to escape the October 2016 violence and now reside in Bangladesh. The Rohingya issue is pertinent to this chapter, as it has been named by both ISIS and AQIS as the cause for which they will be fighting.

Bangladesh, viewed as rapidly becoming a target of ISIS propaganda and physical spread, has seen around 30 ISIS recruits from a population of 148.6 million Muslims. In a *Dabiq* article titled "The Revival of Jihad in Bengal,"<sup>247</sup> ISIS identified Bangladesh as its next base for operations. Extremist groups within Bangladesh, like JMB and ABT, are suspected of being linked to ISIS and have the potential to spread the ISIS extremist ideology in the country.<sup>248</sup> Historically, Bangladesh declared itself a secular state in its constitution, yet

specified Islam as the state religion.<sup>249</sup> In a 2011 amendment to the constitution, the Awami League (AL), who was in power at that time, emphasized the idea of secularism but at the same time retained Islam as the state religion thereby creating ambiguity and constitutional privilege for Islam vis-à-vis other religions.<sup>250</sup> In March 2016, the Bangladesh High Court rejected a 28 year old petition on removing Islam as a state religion.

In recent years, Bangladesh has witnessed a rise in terror attacks against its liberal writers, Shias, and foreigners, including the killings of an Italian aid worker and a Japanese farm expert.<sup>251</sup> ISIS has claimed responsibility for the terror attacks, especially against foreigners, whereas the Bangladeshi government asserts it is the work of local terror groups attaching themselves to ISIS to gain international visibility.

The U.S., in recent years, has increased its CT cooperation with both Bangladesh and Burma. In the fifth U.S.-Bangladesh partnership dialogue, held on 23 and 24 June 2016 in Washington, D.C., both countries committed to increasing CT cooperation and combating violent extremism (CVE). A joint statement identified the shared threat faced from ISIS and al-Qaeda, and it was announced that Bangladesh would participate in the U.S. Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund, equipping both to respond to terror threats effectively.<sup>252</sup> This aspect of CT and CVE is directly relevant to the USSOCOM mission, especially the goal of achieving a high level of proficiency with partner nations to address the issue of terrorism. Understanding the complexity of the ISIS threat faced by Bangladesh and Burma equips USSOCOM with increased knowledge of areas identified by ISIS as future regions for expansion. In addressing those goals, the main thrust of this chapter is to examine whether ISIS is likely to succeed in its claims for Bangladesh, and if there are pockets of population vulnerability, rendering them susceptible to ISIS propaganda. To spread its message, ISIS has utilized apps like Viber, We-chat and WhatsApp by forming group chat rooms, mostly taking advantage of encryption. This strategy proves effective given the popularity of group chats in Bangladesh and Burma. In November 2015, the Bangladesh government banned WhatsApp, Facebook messenger, and Viber, citing security reasons. However, most users defied the ban by using a proxy and a Virtual Private Network. Bangladesh lacks a skilled online regulatory or surveillance system thereby decreasing the effectiveness of such bans.<sup>253</sup>

U.S.-Burma relations lacked any diplomatic engagement for decades due to the military crackdown against democratic protests in 1988 and 1989.<sup>254</sup>

In 1989, NLD leader Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest. In the 1990 elections, the NLD won 392 of the 485 parliamentary seats, but the military refused to honor the results and instead arrested several NLD politicians. However, in 2011, Burma's military introduced political reforms, and several military leaders moved into a civilian government, with General Then Sein becoming president. The new government held elections in 2015, and crafted a constitution. In November 2012, former U.S. President Barack Obama visited Burma, the first visit by a U.S. President. However, the situation within Burma remains fraught with ethnic minorities like Kachins, Karens, and Wa emphasizing that they are not fairly represented by NLD, and the ongoing Rohingya crisis.<sup>255</sup> As mentioned earlier, the Rohingya are Muslim, and both ISIS and al-Qaeda have called the Rohingya their brothers and pledged to fight for them. This chapter examines how susceptible the Rohingya are to ISIS propaganda and recruitment. It is one thing for ISIS to declare a common cause with the Rohingya or for Burma's military to claim that the Rohingya will join ISIS, but to prove that is the case, one has to factually indicate that Rohingya Muslims have indeed joined ISIS or been influenced by its brutal propaganda. Such an analysis is critical for USSOCOM to understand if disempowered Muslim communities are drawn to ISIS, and if not, then to determine the reasons for non-allegiance.

## The Case of Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a democracy with Islam as the state religion.<sup>256</sup> The majority of Bangladeshi Muslims are Sunnis, but there is a small minority of Shia and Ahmadi. Bangladesh has been affected by terror groups like the Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI), established in 1992 with ties to al-Qaeda's International Islamic Front. HuJI supports the goal of establishing an Islamic *hukumat* (rule) based on sharia law in Bangladesh, and is against secular intellectuals, ideals, and festivals in Bangladesh.<sup>257</sup> In June 2014, Bangladesh sentenced to death HuJI leader Mufti Abdul Hannan for his role in a 2001 terror attack that killed 10 people.<sup>258</sup> In 2013 and 2014, in a series of attacks, secular bloggers Ahmed Rajib Haider, Ananta Bijoy Das, and Avijit Roy were hacked to death with machetes. In April 2016, two lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) activists, Xulhaz Mannan and Tanay Mojumdar, were hacked to death in Dhaka. On 1 July 2016, terrorists killed 22 people at the Holey Artisan Bakery in Dhaka, most of whom were foreigners.<sup>259</sup> ABT, the

local Bangladeshi terror group with links to AQIS, claimed responsibility for these attacks.<sup>260</sup> ISIS claimed responsibility for the attacks, as well. In response to the ISIS claim, government officials in Bangladesh expressed skepticism, as they suspect that ISIS falsely claimed credit for terror attacks outside of Iraq and Syria to broadcast a larger presence than it actually has. Yet, some terror experts within Bangladesh believe that JMB has close ties to ISIS. The presence of two local terror groups, ABT and JMB, may result in a proxy fight between al-Qaeda and ISIS for primacy. Moreover, for smaller local terror groups, associating with either al-Qaeda or ISIS has the advantage of creating instant visibility, garnering international media attention, and creating the impression that they are more lethal than they actually are.<sup>261</sup>

## ISIS Goals in Bangladesh

In its online magazine, *Dabiq*, ISIS specifically identified Bangladesh as part of its future area of expansion. Through Bangladesh, the terror group aims to expand into India and Burma. In an article titled “The Revival of Jihad in Bengal” on the group’s site, ISIS called upon local affiliated terror groups to target foreigners, establish sharia, and spread its cells throughout Bangladesh.<sup>262</sup> This explains the killing of foreigners, including Italians, Japanese, an Indian, and an American, in the July 2016 bakery attack, and the killing of a Japanese farm expert and an Italian aid worker earlier. Tamim Ahmed Chowdhury, a Canadian of Bangladeshi origin, appeared to be the mastermind behind the bakery attack, and was directly getting advice from ISIS member Abu Terek Mohammad Tajuddin Kausar. Chowdhury (a.k.a. Abu Ibrahim al-Hanif), the declared head of ISIS in Bangladesh in the *Dabiq* article. He was killed on 27 August 2016 by Bangladesh’s security forces.<sup>263</sup> A lone terrorist blew himself up near Dhaka’s international airport on 24 March 2017, in a week that witnessed similar attacks across the city. ISIS claimed responsibility for all the lone wolf attacks.<sup>264</sup> This pattern of terrorist attacks in Bangladesh points to an ISIS goal of attacking minorities, as well as foreigners, to create local support from Sunni Muslim extremist groups with similar goals.<sup>265</sup> As mentioned earlier, the location of Bangladesh gives ISIS an incentive to expand to Burma and eastern India, especially Assam.<sup>266</sup>

## Rising Intolerance?

The inclusion of Bangladesh in the expansion goals of ISIS offers insight into the growing intolerance in the society. The attacks on minorities and foreigners, with the Bangladesh government blaming local terror groups while ISIS claims responsibility, reveals a political chasm that may turn chaotic. For instance, the government of Sheikh Hasina and the ruling AL blame the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), led by Khalida Zia and her affiliated Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), for instigating the violence.<sup>267</sup> Unlike Indonesia, which has encouraged Islamist parties to participate in elections, the AL government banned JI from participating in elections in 2013. A number of JI leaders were consequently tried for their roles in the East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) genocide of 1971. On 11 May 2016, the founder of JI, Motiur Rahman Nizami, was hanged after the domestic International Crimes Tribunal, set up by the AL, found him guilty of creating a militia, the al-Badr group, which allegedly helped the Pakistani army find and kill pro-independence East Pakistani activists.<sup>268</sup> Between 2013 and 2015, several of JI's top leaders—Ghulam Azam, Mir Quasem Ali, Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mujahid, Delwar Hossain Sayeedi, Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury, and Muhammad Kamaruzzaman—were found guilty of war crimes and most were executed.<sup>269</sup> The opposition BNP, who aligned with JI in their political campaign, accused the AL of a political vendetta and described the trials as unjust.<sup>270</sup> Into this scenario enters the Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS), the student wing of JI. The main objective of the ICS is to change the education curriculum of Bangladesh to reflect Islamic teachings. ICS aims to establish an Afghan Taliban-like regime in Bangladesh. Similar to ISIS in ideology, the ICS rejects democracy and secularism.<sup>271</sup> The ICS has been accused by the Bangladesh government of engineering the recent spate of violence against secular bloggers and foreigners, as well as the killing of Professor Rezaul Siddique, of Rajshahi University, in April 2016.<sup>272</sup>

Bangladesh has been affected by growing protests since the International Crimes Tribunal found the JI leaders guilty of genocide during the 1971 fight for independence. Each verdict has been met with huge protests, as well as a heavy-handed response by the Rapid Action Battalion and Border Guard Bangladesh, and about 150 protestors have died. Bangladesh's government, however, insists that the protestors supporting JI, led by the Hefazat e-Islam (HeI) or Protectors of Islam, turned violent. The Human Rights Watch report

of August 2013 warned: “there is a significant risk that Bangladesh could descend into a vicious cycle of violence and lawlessness.”<sup>273</sup>

In May 2013, Islamist leaders gave the Bangladesh government a list of 84 individuals, asking the government to take action against those individuals for their negative views on Islam and the Prophet expressed on social media. Amongst this Islamist movement in Bangladesh are AQIS, ISIS, and the HeI, which is supported by 25,000 madrassas (religious schools). HeI grew as a response against the secular Shahbag Movement, which supported the war crimes trials, especially against JI leaders. Most of the ensuing killings of artists, writers, professors, students, and foreigners have been claimed by local terror group ABT, who pledge allegiance to both AQIS and ISIS. Bangladesh, in this perspective, appears to be host for a contest between ISIS and AQIS meant to prove to local terror groups which of the two groups has the capability and resources to spread its hold into the country. After the 2013 attacks on atheist and secular bloggers, all claimed by ABT, the 2015 attack on Bangladeshi-American writer Avijit Roy was claimed by AQIS. AQIS leader Maulana Asim Umar also claimed the killings of Mannan and LGBT activists, issuing the statement: “By the grace of Almighty Allah, the Mujahidin of Ansar-al-Islam (AQIS-Bangladesh branch) carried out these attacks.”<sup>274</sup> Umar appeared in a 2 May 2015 video and claimed AQIS responsibility. The attack on Italian aid worker Cesare Tavella in September 2015 was the first attack claimed by ISIS. The pattern that emerged from this attack was different from earlier attacks claimed by AQIS. Instead of targeting local bloggers, artists, or writers, the first ISIS-inspired attack targeted a foreigner.<sup>275</sup> As mentioned earlier, this was followed by the attack on a Japanese national and the bakery attacks.

The pattern of attacks reveals that both ISIS and AQIS view Bangladesh as potential ground for spreading terror. In the past, Bangladesh has been a conduit for illegal arms from Southeast Asia into India via the Chittagong area. Chittagong illegal weapons dealers serve as middlemen for weapons manufactured by Burma’s rebel United Wa State Army (UWSA) and Chinese small arms dealers—the consumers are usually rebel groups in northeast India as well as Islamist groups in Bangladesh.<sup>276</sup> What is relevant from a U.S. SOF perspective is the transnational nature of terrorism, where networks are established across regions.<sup>277</sup> Both ISIS and al-Qaeda aim to spread their roots into Bangladesh to create another front, in the way that al-Qaeda has

succeeded in creating al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, AQIS, and al-Qaeda in the Maghreb.

From a CT perspective, U.S. SOF, can gather and exchange intelligence with Bangladesh's security agencies in order to gauge the potential for ISIS to spread into remote areas of Bangladesh, especially after losing territory in Iraq and Syria and the killing of ISIS Khorasan leader Sheikh Abdul Hasib on 27 April 2017.<sup>278</sup> Bangladesh may prove difficult ground for the quick spread ISIS is aiming for, due to a lack of ethnic linkage to the group's Arab Sunni leadership (Bengalis are not Arab), the strong presence of political parties that represent Muslims in Bangladesh's state institutions, the presence of the country's 260,000-strong professional armed forces including special forces, and their international exposure, especially through UN peacekeeping operations.<sup>279</sup> Also, the presence of the Bangladeshi state, while weak in remote areas, is still visible. However, the 'denial strategy' adopted by the Bangladesh government with regard to the presence of ISIS in the country may not be smart in the long run or ensure that ISIS cannot penetrate Bangladesh by aligning itself with local terror groups.

It makes business sense for Bangladesh to deny the presence of ISIS given the country's dependence on foreign investments to augment its local industries, especially the garment industry, which has single-handedly addressed poverty and raised employment. But, in the long run, a clear diagnosis of the problem will assist efforts to counter ISIS.<sup>280</sup> Bangladesh needs foreign direct investment, and a bolstered ISIS presence can scare potential foreign investors. ISIS's targeting of foreigners could be aimed at such an effect. Consequently, the Bangladesh government has to break the strategy of denial by classifying all ISIS claims about terror attacks as mere propaganda. Bangladesh's Inspector General of Police, A.K.M. Shahidul Haque, asserted that the idea of ISIS's presence in Bangladesh was without basis: "What we call militants are actually homegrown who might have been embodied with IS philosophy and ideology. But they don't have any link with the IS."<sup>281</sup> Facts from the July 2016 terror attack on the Holey Artisan Bakery clearly revealed the hand of ISIS. As the attack was ongoing and gunmen were holding hostages, ISIS published pictures of those killed inside the bakery on its propaganda website, Amaq al-Ekhbariyah. That exposed the close coordination between the gunmen and ISIS. Thus, a clear diagnosis of the problem would alert security agencies to break the linkages that ISIS aims to establish in Bangladesh.

## The Case of Burma

Burma is home to nearly 1.4 million Rohingya Muslims, especially in its western Rakhine state. Rohingya populations migrated to the Arakan region (now Rakhine state) of Burma in the 15th century. This migration was further emboldened during British rule in Burma (1824–1948), as it removed the Burma border with then unified Bengal as part of British India. Burma, however, refuses to recognize the Rohingya as one of the 135 officially recognized ethnic groups. Despite their presence in Burma for centuries, Rohingya are categorized as illegal Bengali immigrants, and a 1982 law stripped them of any Burma citizenship, rendering them stateless. The Burma government bans the Rohingya community from identifying themselves as Rohingya.<sup>282</sup> Burma's Buddhist population views the Rohingya as a threat to their land, given existing disputed, overlapping land claims. The Rohingya temporary residence 'white card' permit was cancelled in 2015 by the Thein Sein government due to protests by the Buddhist majority, thereby taking away the Rohingya's right to participate in that year's elections. As mentioned earlier, there were no Muslim candidates in that election.<sup>283</sup>

Significantly, Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD has done little toward representing Burma's Muslim population. For instance, NLD's vice president in Mandalay, Win Mya Mya, a Muslim, applied to participate in the 2015 elections but was debarred based on her religion. U Thaung Zaw, the head of Burma's immigration department in Mandalay, stated that anyone Muslim is identified as Indian. The government refused to issue national registration cards to those Muslims who declined to identify themselves as Indian or Pakistani, despite them having no connections to India or Pakistan for generations.<sup>284</sup> Muslims accuse the NLD of compromising on democratic principles, doing little to salvage their desperate situation. Anti-Muslim sentiment is high in Burma and Buddhist monks like Asin Wirathu (who ironically calls himself the "the Burmese Bin Laden"), routinely preach hatred and fear of Muslims. As is well known, monks like Wirathu have a deep influence across the 60-million-strong Burmese Buddhist majority. Buddhist monks created a national campaign—the 969 Movement—in 2001 to boycott Muslim businesses in Burma. Wirathu portrays Islam as a religion that aims to convert Burmese Buddhist girls by intermarriage and then produce numerous offspring to skew the population ratio in favor of Muslims.<sup>285</sup> Burmese Buddhists are now encouraged to visibly place signs on their houses and businesses to display

their Buddhist affiliations. Wirathu alleges: “The local Muslims are crude and savage because the extremists are pulling the strings, providing them with financial, military, and technical power.”<sup>286</sup>

Since 2012, Burma has been plagued by violence, especially in Rakhine state between Arakanese Buddhists and Rohingya. Ignited by a rumor that a 28-year-old Buddhist woman was raped and killed by Rohingya Muslim men, Buddhists set fire to Muslim villages in nine townships. Communal violence broke out quickly, and a report by Human Rights Watch accuses the Burma state security forces of siding with the Arakanese Buddhists.<sup>287</sup> The violence in October 2012 was systematically planned, backed by a narrative that the Rohingya Muslims were a severe threat to Arakanese Buddhists’ land and homes. The violence against the Rohingya was not random, but planned months in advance, with local Arakan political parties, like the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP), and Buddhist monks’ associations, like the All-Arakanese Monks’ Solidarity Conference (AAMSC), issuing statements that targeted the Rohingya, urging local Arakanese Buddhists to forcibly remove them from their homes.<sup>288</sup> Adding fuel to the fire, President Thein Sein issued a statement in July 2012 that Rohingya Muslims were illegal and should be sent to a third country.<sup>289</sup>

According to Vijay Nambiar, the special adviser to the UN Secretary-General on Burma, the violence perpetrated by Burma’s security forces against Rohingya civilians was disproportionate, and he cautioned against future violence if more steps were not taken to increase security in the affected areas.<sup>290</sup> Nambiar issued an appeal to Burma, stating:

I call upon Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to reflect on the situation and, as she has done on so many occasions, to listen to her “inner voice” and speak directly to the people of Myanmar, asking them to rise above their ethnic, religious and other differences and to advance human dignity, harmony and mutual cooperation between all communities ... Furthermore, a reiteration of her promise to address the root causes affecting the local population, namely that of citizenship and status, and to provide relief to the internally displaced since 2012, would go a long way to relieve tension and promote realistic and sustainable solutions.<sup>291</sup>

NLD leader and Nobel laureate, Suu Kyi denied reports that there was systematic killing of Rohingya Muslims,<sup>292</sup> while at the same time, the UN

announced an investigation into reports that the military (*Tatmadaw*) was using disproportionate force against the Rohingya.<sup>293</sup> In November 2016, John McKissick of the UN refugee agency accused Burma of carrying out an ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslims under the guise of COIN carried out by the Tatmadaw and the Border Guard Police (BGP).<sup>294</sup> The Burma government accused the Rohingya of deliberately setting fire to their own houses, and international media is barred from traveling to the affected areas.<sup>295</sup> Most Burmese populations in Burma support strong action against the Rohingya Muslims, whom they view as illegal Bengali immigrants. About 70,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh. The situation became further complicated after nine BGP personnel were killed in a coordinated attack at border posts in Maungdaw in October 2016.<sup>296</sup> The attack has been connected to a Rohingya militant group.<sup>297</sup> In August 2017, violence flared up in the Rakhine state when about 20 police stations were attacked by insurgents belonging to the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA).<sup>298</sup> This brought about a massive counter-offensive by the Burmese military, resulting in mass exodus of the Rohingya minority to Bangladesh. By mid-September 2017, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that 313, 000 Rohingya Muslims fled Burma facing atrocities in the hands of the Burma military.<sup>299</sup> The UN Human Rights Chief, Zeid Ra'ad al-Husseini termed the violence a "textbook example of ethnic cleansing."<sup>300</sup> Consequently, 40 percent of Rohingya villages are empty of people.<sup>301</sup>

Into this scenario of communal violence enters groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS.<sup>302</sup> Both terror groups have noted the Rohingya crisis, and called upon fellow Muslims to fight for the Rohingya cause. There are concerns that Rohingya Muslims fleeing Burma may end up joining ISIS, which is looking for new recruits as the war in Iraq and Syria gets more intense. ISIS is already posting online messages on its recruiting sites targeting the Rohingya community.<sup>303</sup> ISIS offers attractive packages for entire Muslim families to migrate to its Islamic caliphate, especially attractive to those who have nowhere to go.<sup>304</sup> Malaysian CT officials warn of ISIS recruits trying to travel to Burma to launch jihad in support of the Rohingya, after an ISIS suspect was detained in Malaysia.<sup>305</sup> A group called Harakah al-Yaqin (Faith Movement; HaY) was alleged to be behind the October 2016 attack on the BGP. HaY is a group formed from Rohingya emigres in Saudi Arabia. The International Crisis Group (ICG) cautions that HaY is a well-funded and well-trained group, and is a game changer in Burma, adding one more insurgency

with international connections to other jihadi organizations to the Burma conflict.<sup>306</sup> Wakar Uddin, director-general of the Arakan Rohingya Union, is skeptical of the international links to the HaY drawn by ICG. He cautioned:

This unfortunately feeds into the Myanmar government’s narrative linking the Rohingya cause to international jihadism as a justification for the recent obliteration of Rohingya villages, causing more than 100,000 people to take refuge in Bangladesh and Rohingya villages in Maungdaw area, and its armed forces committing crimes against humanity.<sup>307</sup>

HaY has released YouTube videos denying any international terrorist connections, and claim that they are mostly fighting with spears and machetes, contrary to the well-funded and well-armed group that ICG claims it is. In an interview with CNN, HaY leader Atah Ullah asserted that, “We, the vulnerable and persecuted people, have asked the international community for protection against the atrocities by the government of Burma, but the international community turned its back on us.”<sup>308</sup> Moreover, for the ICG’s Burma consultant, Richard Horsey, to portray the HaY as a well-organized jihadi movement appears implausible, as the group’s goals are locally focused on Rohingya rights within Burma, and are not aimed at establishing an Islamic state. HaY leader Ullah insists that they have nothing in common with ISIS. In addition, Rohingya Muslims are Sufis who follow a moderate version of Sunni Islam, and have never participated in any radical transnational terror groups. However, the severely discriminatory situation they find themselves in Burma might increase the likelihood of some amongst them taking advantage of ISIS’s calls for taking up their cause.

That said, for the Rohingya Muslims to adopt ISIS ideology it would require a conversion to ISIS Salafi religious cult, which is unlikely. Rohingya Muslims have lived in Burma for decades, especially in the Rakhine state of Burma that borders Bangladesh. To date, there has been little support from that community to terror groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS. Even those who have followed a more conservative version of Islam have shown little or no inclination. The barriers that create natural antibodies against an ISIS/al-Qaeda expansion could be language and culture. Nevertheless, areas of concern

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for radicalization are the refugee camps across the border in Bangladesh which houses nearly 600,000 displaced Rohingya population. Twenty-three such camps are housed near Cox's Bazar, in Bangladesh.<sup>309</sup> It is important to realize for context that Cox's Bazar serves as the conduit of illegal small arms flowing from Burma to armed insurgencies in Northeast India.<sup>310</sup> It houses several illegal arms manufacturers who sell these arms for profit thereby increasing the feasibility for violence—a factor required for insurgency and terrorism to flourish.

Recently, al-Qaeda released a statement in response to the violence in Burma:

The savage treatment meted out to our Muslim brothers in Arakan by the government of Burma under the guise of 'fighting rebels' shall not pass without punishment, and the government of Burma shall be made to taste what our Muslim brothers have tasted in Arakan, with the permission of Allah.<sup>311</sup>

Yet, this call has gone unanswered. ISIS foreign fighters, especially mercenaries, may want to take up the cause of the Rohingya Muslims but it really makes little material sense given these areas are extremely poor. Moreover, some of the ISIS foreign fighters view the Rohingya as polytheistic non-Buddhists, not worthy of saving in the name of Islam.<sup>312</sup> The Rohingya Muslims themselves have shunned such extremist foreign help as is vindicated by the statements of the ARSA.<sup>313</sup> The networks that lured foreign fighters to Syria via Turkey does not exist in Burma.

Nevertheless, the brutal behavior demonstrated by the Burma military towards the Rohingya community renders them desperate and this may be a factor in them turning to extremist violence. Yanghee Lee, the UN special rapporteur on human rights in Burma, who visited the country in January 2017, urged the government to address the Rohingya situation, asserting that denial and a lack of response encourages extremist elements. Two more organizations that merit attention are the Bangladesh-based Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO), formed in 1982, and a splinter group, the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front, formed in 1986.<sup>314</sup> A Burma military intelligence report accusing 90 RSO of getting trained in Pakistan and 13 others training in Libya and Afghanistan was called "generally plausible"<sup>315</sup> in a 2002 U.S. diplomatic cable, although it has not been backed by any primary input

from the United States. To date, no direct link has been established between Rohingya Muslims and ISIS.

Jihadi websites have expressed outrage at the persecution of Rohingya Muslims within Burma, but none have shown any proclivity toward establishing a base organization in the country. Groups like ISIS or al-Qaeda have to work hard to set down roots in northern Rakhine state, given the strong presence of a hostile population (Buddhists) backed by a rather focused COIN campaign. Moreover, the Rohingya Muslims are not a priority for these terror outfits, which are aimed mostly at Arab Sunni Muslim causes or a transnational Islamic caliphate. Rohingya Muslims also have displayed little attraction to the brutal tactics of ISIS or Islamic fundamentalism. The language barrier, with Arabs unable to speak Bengali and Rohingya Muslims not fluent in Arabic, creates a further disconnect.

The Rohingya issue is a local issue that stems from land and citizenship rights, unlike the grandiose aims of al-Qaeda to establish a Muslim ummah and ISIS to establish a caliphate. HaY is locally focused against the military of Burma, like the other Burma ethnic insurgencies, and does not locate its struggle within a global jihad. HaY has pledged not to target civilians and to dissolve itself once Rohingya Muslims are given citizenship and other related rights within Burma.<sup>316</sup> Yet concerns remain, given Burma's multiple armed ethnic insurgencies including the Kachin Independence Organization, the Shan State Army, and the UWSA.<sup>317</sup> And, given the attraction ISIS has to Iraqi Baath Party members—who were disenfranchised in Iraq and barred from representation in Iraq's parliament; and Burma's Rohingya population—who were disenfranchised since 2015 and barred from voting in elections and holding office, ISIS might be attracted to them as well. Disenfranchisement of the Rohingya Muslims means they have no means of peaceful representation within Burma.

There are apprehensions that the disproportionate use of force by the Burma military against Rohingya Muslims could result in radicalization, rendering them vulnerable to propaganda from ISIS. The escalation of violence in the northern Rakhine state where Rohingya Muslims are viewed as a majority and Rakhine Buddhists are a minority have resulted in calls by the latter to arm Buddhist villagers for self-defense. This could aggravate the conflict-ridden situation even further with HaY, who has made a commitment not to target Buddhist civilians, but might view armed civilians as a legitimate target. HaY has laid claim to attacks on BGP and the Burma

military on YouTube in order to ensure that Rohingya diaspora funding does not go to groups like the RSO, which is mostly defunct. It is in the search for external resources, especially from the Middle East, that groups like HaY are likely to become susceptible to larger terror groups, like ISIS.

## Considerations for U.S. SOF

There are several lessons that can be drawn for U.S. SOF from ISIS goals in Bangladesh and Burma, as well as the situation that exists in both countries.

First, given the decreasing territorial hold ISIS has on Iraq and Syria, in Iraq and Syria, the terror group will aim to expand its influence and presence in countries outside the region. This serves two specific purposes. First, it creates the impression that ISIS is a transnational movement with networks across regions. Second, it offers a base for continuous regrouping, recruitment, and resources. This can then be utilized to come back at a later stage.

Second, both Bangladesh and Burma have populations that could offer sanctuary to ISIS for religious purposes as well as for a payment. Given one of the aims of ISIS is to stage attacks in Western countries, as well as against foreigners, it makes practical sense to keep a tight rein on its activities in Bangladesh and its potential for growth in Burma. USSOCOM, in collaboration with both Bangladesh and Burma security agencies, could trace the networks that ISIS has already established or may try to establish in both countries, and counter those before they gain traction in society.

Third, ISIS utilizes social media apps to spread its ideology, form networks, and bond with Muslims around the world. Those that are popular in Bangladesh and Burma are Viber, We-chat, and WhatsApp. Keeping track of those communications is hard, but can be done if one knows how ISIS strategizes its communications. Telegram is not popular, while Viber is used the most, followed by WhatsApp.

Fourth, the Rohingya issue is already drawing external funding, especially from the Rohingya diaspora in Saudi Arabia who have helped HaY. HaY leader Atah Ullah grew up in Saudi Arabia, and left a job there to travel to the Rakhine state to stage an insurgency. Similar external funding could flow to Bangladeshi terror groups, like ABT and JMB, who pledge allegiance to ISIS. Both have talked of taking up the Rohingya issue, which could attract funds. For instance, in its April 2016 *Dabiq* magazine, Bangladeshi ISIS militant Abu Ibrahim called for jihad in Burma to support the Rohingya cause.<sup>318</sup>

Fifth, the Rohingya issue and its peaceful resolution within Burma is of importance to the USSOCOM mission from two perspectives. First, it would deny radicalized Muslim youths a cause to rally around. For example, Ohio State University student Abdul Razak Ali Artan staged an attack on campus in November 2016. Artan stated in his Facebook posts that the “reports of human rights abuses in Burma pushed him to a ‘boiling point.’”<sup>319</sup> ISIS claimed responsibility for that Ohio attack, mainly for the propaganda impact of owning up to all lone wolf attacks to demonstrate its reach. The Rohingya issue also gives a cause to potential ISIS recruits in Malaysia and Indonesia. In November 2016, a terror attack was foiled in Jakarta, Indonesia, that included plans to plant highly explosive chemicals, with the Burma embassy as one of the targets.<sup>320</sup> Indonesian National Police spokesman Rikwanto believed that Rio Priatna Wibawa, arrested for planning that attack, was tied to Bahrn Naim, an Indonesian militant who supports ISIS.<sup>321</sup>

Finally, Bangladesh has witnessed several terror strikes including the 11 May 2017 attack. ISIS has claimed responsibility for several attacks, and some local terror groups have pledged their allegiance to ISIS. While the Bangladesh government denies the presence of ISIS, it is critical to realize that allegiance is connected to online communication, sharing of terror strategies, travel, as well as loyalty. With loyalty, will come resources. By establishing a connection, a social network is established that works to the advantage of terror groups like ISIS, allowing them to broadcast their presence over a wider area and reach out to rival groups. The key is to ensure that such connections and networks do not establish roots.



## Chapter 4. Questioning ISIS Ideology in India

In May 2016, ISIS spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, later killed in a U.S. airstrike, called upon ISIS supporters to prove their allegiance to the caliphate by carrying out attacks in their countries of origin. The Manchester terror bombing of May 2017 is case in point. Instead of demanding a show of allegiance by traveling to the caliphate, ISIS now sanctioned lone wolf attacks in countries identified by the group as terror targets.

In a May 2016 ISIS video targeted at India, the group pledged to fight for Muslims in Kashmir, Assam, and Gujarat, and threatened Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.<sup>322</sup> In the video, an Indian ISIS member warns: “I say you have only three options: to accept Islam, to pay jizya, or to prepare to be slaughtered.”<sup>323</sup> ISIS utilized historical Muslim conquests of Sindh and Multan (now in Pakistan), especially under General Muhammad bin Qasim of the Umayyad caliphate in the 8th century, as a justification for its present ambitions to take over Indian territory.

The stated strategy of ISIS for India is to create fear by collaborating with local units, and expand its wilayat, named Wilayat Khorasan. ISIS aims to occupy India via Pakistan and Afghanistan based on a two-prong strategy. First, the group wants to take over the conventional capabilities of Pakistan including its nuclear arsenal, and Afghanistan, and use them against India. Second, it plans to collaborate with local Indian terror groups to create fear and chaos based on a strategy of attrition. In this second strategy, a faction of Indian Mujahideen (IM) or Islamist guerrilla fighters, Ansar ut-Tawhid fi Bilad al-Hind (Supporters of Monotheism in the Land of India, or AuT), could prove useful to ISIS goals. Local issues like the 2002 Gujarat riots, Kashmir, and the treatment of minorities, are cited as reasons for expansion by ISIS to India. There is another local Indian faction of ISIS, the Junud al Khalifa-e-Hind (Soldiers of the Indian caliphate, or JKH).<sup>324</sup> This group is led by Indian engineering student Aman Tandel from Mumbai who functions under the pseudonym Abu Amr’ al-Hindi.

The primary goal of USSOCOM is to analyze and successfully respond to ISIS attempts to spread terror across borders. Within the domain of CT and COIN, understanding the manner in which ISIS creates networks in

countries outside of its caliphate in Iraq and Syria offers useful lessons not only to break those networks, but also to create awareness in the U.S. of similar ISIS efforts. ISIS utilizes the same strategy in the West, where it aims to motivate Western citizens to join the caliphate and then carry out attacks in its name in their countries of origin, as it does in India. The more ISIS loses territory in Iraq and Syria, the more likely it is that the group will quickly draw upon this sort of non-state strategy.

The attempts of ISIS to create local terror networks in India is motivated by the fact that very few Indians have traveled to the caliphate or made attempts to undertake the difficult journey. In order to stay relevant, ISIS will turn itself into an al-Qaeda type of transnational terror group. In battling ISIS, CT cooperation between India and the U.S. should be further strengthened. For instance, the Indian leader of AuT, Mohammad Shafi Armar, has been named a “Specially Designated Global Terrorist,” by the U.S. in June 2017, debunking earlier reports of his alleged death in U.S. airstrikes in Syria in April 2016.<sup>325</sup> A statement from the U.S. Department of State specifies that “Mohammad Shafi Armar is a leader and head recruiter in India for the Foreign Terrorist Organization and Specially Designated Global Terrorist group, ISIS. He has cultivated a group of dozens of ISIS sympathizers who are involved in terrorist activities across India such as plotting attacks, procuring weapons, and identifying locations for terrorist training camps.”<sup>326</sup> This kind of cooperation has led to India’s ability to limit the spread of ISIS within its borders. From the perspective of USSOCOM, it is pertinent to realize that countries like India and Indonesia may offer lessons on how post-conflict stabilization may be achieved in the long term.

## **The Case of India**

India, a Hindu-majority country, hosts the second largest Muslim population in the world.<sup>327</sup> By 2050, India will have the world’s largest Muslim population with 311 million.<sup>328</sup> The country has suffered from a history of Hindu-Muslim internal conflicts, beginning with the partition of the country in 1947. The 1992 demolition of the Babri mosque and 2002 riots in Gujarat caught the attention of the world.<sup>329</sup> Then, ISIS included India in its map for expansion, released in 2014. In the May 2016 video message, ISIS mocked Indian Muslims for living in harmony with kuffar Hindus, and called upon them to travel to the caliphate or carry out terror attacks in India. Despite

this history and ISIS focusing on India, the number of Indian Muslims traveling to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS pales in comparison to the high flows from Russia, the UK, Germany, and France, as noted earlier.

This chapter highlights the factors that have worked within the Indian political and social milieu in questioning and delegitimizing groups like ISIS. The chapter explains the role of Indian CT units, including the National Security Guard (NSG) and the Indian special forces, in their fight against terrorism. India also has set up institutions like the National Investigation Agency (NIA), which functions as the central CT law enforcement agency in India, since the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks.<sup>330</sup>

### ISIS Goals in India

ISIS outlined its plans for India in its 2014 expansion map. The timeline for the takeover specified: 2013 to 2014 to be spent in taking over territory in the Arab world. By 2020 to 2023, they plotted to spread their presence to the Indian subcontinent.<sup>331</sup> The group's tactical plan for spreading itself inside India was to first establish its presence through splinter groups and then gradually take over territory. In this, local Muslim terror groups like IM could prove useful,<sup>332</sup> once it pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi. ISIS aimed to enter India via Pakistan and Afghanistan to carry out terror attacks. On 4 April 2017, for instance, the Indian Coast Guard sent a fax to the Mumbai police that three ISIS terrorists attempted to enter India via the sea, rekindling memories of the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks, whose perpetrators also entered the country by sea.<sup>333</sup>

In its propaganda message, ISIS identifies Gujarat, Assam, and Kashmir specifically as issues pertaining to Muslims in India. With regard to Gujarat, ISIS wants to take revenge for the 2002 Godhra riots between Hindus and Muslims, at a time when Indian Prime Minister Modi was the Chief Minister of the state. There were 790 Muslims and 254 Hindus killed in the riots, and there were accusations that the state authorities under Modi failed to adequately respond to the riots or safeguard Muslim lives.<sup>334</sup> The issue of Kashmiri Muslims and their movement for secession led by the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), is mentioned in the ISIS video. The plight of Muslims in Assam, especially due to the politics of identity in the state vis-à-vis illegal immigration from Bangladesh is the third issue that ISIS mentions as part of its reason to target India. ISIS plans to attack India

via its bases in Bangladesh, according to an interview with the ISIS magazine *Dabiq* given by Shaykh Abu Ibrahim Al-Hanif, or Amir of Khilafah in Bengal, in April 2016. Hanif indicated that ISIS bases in Pakistan and Bengal (i.e., Bangladesh) will enable the terror group to carry out a two-front attack on India.<sup>335</sup>

In March 2017, ISIS launched its first terror attack in India when an ISIS-affiliated Indian recruit set off a bomb on a train in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, injuring 10 passengers.<sup>336</sup> The leader of the Indian ISIS cell, Saifullah, was later shot dead by an Indian CT unit in Lucknow. Most of those involved in the attack had never traveled to Syria or Iraq, but were in contact with an ISIS Khorasan cell via social media. In June 2016, the NIA and the Hyderabad police busted an ISIS cell that was planning a terror attack. Five people were arrested and a huge amount of ammunition was recovered from the site of the arrest.<sup>337</sup> Another Indian state, known for international tourism, Kerala, also witnessed about 16 of its Muslim citizens join ISIS. Again, the recruitment occurred through social media.<sup>338</sup> In March 2017, ISIS threats to the Taj Mahal in Agra resulted in heightened security, especially after an ISIS picture, shared on an encrypted social media app Telegram, showed the words ‘New Target’ in Arabic superimposed onto an image of the Taj Mahal.<sup>339</sup> Two bomb blasts followed, one on a train in the Agra Cantonment, and the second on the roof of a nearby house. Neither resulted in casualties. Although ISIS did not claim responsibility, the terror attacks succeeded in creating widespread panic in an otherwise tourist-focused city.<sup>340</sup> This is a clever strategy on the part of ISIS, creating panic and fear that results in poor tourism to India. For instance, the U.S. Embassy in Delhi issued a warning to American citizens in November 2016 to avoid popular spots in India, due to the looming ISIS threat.<sup>341</sup> Moreover, if ISIS succeeds in inspiring local Muslims to align with its cause, that is reason for concern.

ISIS identifies Kashmir—the only Muslim-majority state in India—as a front in its spread to India. Kashmir, on a cursory glance, appears vulnerable due to the long-standing political upheaval in the state since India’s independence. While the Hindu Maharaja (King) of Kashmir signed an ‘Instrument of Accession’ with India after being attacked by Pakistani tribal armies, the state suffered from secessionist violence. With Pakistani military occupying parts of the state, the Muslim population of the valley demanded *azadi* (freedom). In 1948, in UN Security Council Resolution 47 on the India-Pakistan

question,<sup>342</sup> it was decided to hold a plebiscite to resolve the status of Jammu and Kashmir, but only after all Pakistani troops and tribesmen had withdrawn.<sup>343</sup> Even after a ceasefire between India and Pakistan came into force, Pakistan did not withdraw its troops, and India asserted in 1951 that no plebiscite was required because elections held in Indian administered Jammu and Kashmir backed accession to India. By 1957, the Jammu and Kashmir constitution defined the state as part of India. By 1959, another major player, China, entered the fray by occupying Aksai China, part of Kashmir. China defeated India in 1962 and Pakistan ceded the Trans-Karakoram tract of Kashmir to China in 1963. India and Pakistan fought two more wars over Kashmir in 1965 and 1999, both times resulting in defeat for Pakistan. In 1987, following a disputed state election in Kashmir, an insurgency ensued led by the JKLF. For the next 10 years or so, the Kashmir valley erupted in conflict, as well as cross-border terrorism. India has been accused of using disproportionate military tactics in its fight against the insurgency. The Kashmiri terrorist group, Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), launched terror attacks on the military. While JKLF leader Yassin Mallik has agreed to give up violence, Kashmir's movement for secession continues to this day, with protests in the streets amid calls to safeguard the Kashmiri Muslim identity.<sup>344</sup> ISIS aims to pick up the Kashmir issue as part of its Indian goals and garner support for the establishment of a caliphate.

The Kashmir dispute motivated other terror groups to strike India. One of them is the Pakistan-based Sunni terror group, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), the group responsible for the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks. LeT leader Hafiz Saeed aimed to exploit Hindu-Muslim tensions to draw in recruits to target India. LeT attacked Indian military bases, civilians, and lent its support to Indian terror groups, like IM. Another major terror group is al-Qaeda, which announced AQIS in September 2014, at about the same time that ISIS established its caliphate.<sup>345</sup> AQIS, with bases in Pakistan, is in charge of India, Bangladesh, and Burma. To challenge al-Baghdadi's caliphate, al-Qaeda chief al-Zawahiri pledged to establish his own version of the caliphate. ISIS and al-Qaeda are not aligned, and there is growing competition between them. ISIS considers LeT an ally of al-Qaeda and the Pakistani army, as apostates.<sup>346</sup> This could be a reaction to both the refusal of al-Qaeda and LeT to give allegiance to ISIS, and the Pakistani army's collaboration with the West in CT. While the focus of LeT is Kashmir and its accession to Pakistan, based on its larger goal of "liberating Muslim territories under non-Muslim rule,"<sup>347</sup> AQI

is not solely focused on Kashmir or India, but Burma and Bangladesh as well. Both LeT and AQI have been successful in recruiting locally in Pakistan, to include LeT leader, Hafiz Muhammad Saeed, and AQI leader, Asim Umar, both Pakistani nationals.<sup>348</sup>

Similarly, the northeastern Indian state of Assam has long been afflicted by the politics of illegal Muslim immigration from Bangladesh. This perceived sense of being overwhelmed by Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants, especially by them registering to vote illegally in Assam's state elections, resulted in a five-year Assam student movement from 1979 to 1985. In a population of 32 million in Assam, 6 million are believed to be illegal immigrants, though no official data exists. This lack of data creates societal anxiety. Assam witnessed violent movements against illegal Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants by the Bodo Liberation Tigers and the United Liberation Front of Asom, to name a few. In 2014, hundreds of Muslim immigrants were attacked in the Bodo areas of Assam, resulting in several deaths.<sup>349</sup> ISIS has noted these attacks on Muslims in Assam, and mentioned them as one of their reasons to target India.<sup>350</sup>

The key question for USSOCOM is: Will ISIS successfully spread into India like it claims? Do multiple terror attacks allegedly inspired by ISIS amount to an increasing ISIS presence in India? Also, why is it that only 23 Indian Muslims,<sup>351</sup> out of a population of 176.2 million Indian Muslims,<sup>352</sup> traveled to the ISIS caliphate? To put this in perspective, that is only 0.00001 percent of the Muslim population in India. Are there lessons to be considered from the Indian experiences with CT that could be relevant to the mission of U.S. SOF relating to CT and COIN?

## **Limits of ISIS Appeal in India**

### **Political and Social Factors**

India's independence in 1947 gave birth to a democratic secular nation. The right to practice one's religion without discrimination is a fundamental right enshrined in the Constitution of India. Consequently, the Indian state finds representation from Muslims across its various institutions. Three Indian Muslims have been president of India, the highest state post in the Indian Republic: Zakir Hussain, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, and A.P.J. Abdul Kalam. The immediate past vice president of India is Mohammad Hamid Ansari.<sup>353</sup> Several government positions are filled by Muslims, including the Cabinet,

as well as the administration. That, in turn, creates a representative structure that is inclusive.

The Indian constitution guarantees fundamental rights that are legally enforceable, including the right to equality, which contains guarantees against any form of discrimination. Articles 25 to 28 guarantee freedom of religion with a commitment to secularism. However, India has suffered from religious riots that have highlighted the tensions that exist between its religious communities. In December 1992 and January 1993, the city of Mumbai broke out in Hindu-Muslim riots in which 1,000 people, most of them Muslims, were killed.<sup>354</sup> Instigated by a Hindu extremist group, the Shiv Sena, riots broke out after the Babri Masjid mosque, in the Indian city of Ayodhya, which was destroyed by a Hindu mob on 6 December 1992. This was followed by multiple bomb blasts in Mumbai (then Bombay) on 12 March 1993, which killed nearly 257 people and was allegedly set off by the leaders of the Muslim underworld. Several iconic structures, like the Bombay Stock Exchange, the Century Bazar, and the Air India building, amongst others, were targeted. The masterminds behind the blasts were Dawood Ibrahim (now in Pakistan), who fled to Dubai before the blasts and then on to Pakistan, and Tiger Memon. Mumbai was to witness more terror attacks in 2003, 2006, and 2008.<sup>355</sup> In 2008, multiple terror attacks, perpetrated by the Indian Muslim terror group IM, targeted Indian cities like Ahmedabad, Jaipur, and Bengaluru, killing nearly 200 civilians.<sup>356</sup> The IM, in its manifesto sent to Indian media houses, cited the Gujarat riots, Indian antiterrorism squads, as well as biased reporting on Muslim groups while turning a blind eye to Hindu extremist terror, as causes for its attacks.<sup>357</sup>

While radical extremism is a potent cause of concern within India,<sup>358</sup> Indian political factors such as the representation of Muslim leaders in its political structures, help mitigate tensions to a large extent. The Ministry of Minority Affairs, led by a Muslim minister, currently Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi, is aimed at addressing minority issues related to Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Sikhs, Parsis, and Jains. The vision of the ministry is: “Empowering the minority communities and creating an enabling environment for strengthening the multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-lingual and multi-religious character of our nation.”<sup>359</sup>

Besides political representation, several famous Indian personalities are Muslim, including popular Bollywood film actors Aamir Khan, Shah Rukh Khan, Salman Khan, as well as sports personalities like tennis player Shania

Mirza and cricketer Irfan Pathan, to name a few. This visible representation of Indian Muslims in society is critical, as it offers the possibility of growth and fame, and most importantly, dignity. It is such representation, including famous Indian Muslim freedom fighters like Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, a close friend of Gandhi that has worked against creating a perennial condition of religious divide and fear. Even cities like Mumbai have succeeded in bouncing back, rekindling its cosmopolitan spirit after the 2008 terror attacks.<sup>360</sup> This spirit can be traced back in history as far as the 16th century, when Indian Mughal Emperor Akbar shaped a unified empire by including Hindus in his administration rather than excluding them. This history forms an important part of present day national and local folklore, is memorialized in popular films, and is taught in the classroom. Muslim rule in India spanned centuries, and Persian, Arabic, and Turkish influences have seeped into Hindu culture, including the arts, architecture, and strategic thinking. In turn, Islam in India has been influenced by Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, and has succeeded in creating a similar theology to the Indonesian Nusantara that focuses on pluralism and tolerance of other faiths.

### **Muslim Civil Society Organizations**

Besides social and political factors propelled by democratic representation, the most effective firewall against ISIS spreading into India are Indian Muslim civil society organizations.<sup>361</sup> The Indian Muslim Ulema (scholars with expertise on Islamic theology and sacred law) have issued *fatwas* (legal decrees) against ISIS or anyone from India who joins it. In December 2015, in response to ISIS claims that it would spread into India, nearly 70,000 Indian Muslim clerics issued a fatwa against ISIS during the famous Urs-e-Razvi festival at the *Dargah-e-Aala Hazrat* (a shrine built over the tomb of a revered religious figure) in Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh. Hazrat Subhan Raza Khan, chairperson of the influential Dargah, stated that the fatwa was a condemnation of terror attacks across the world, and was meant to send a message that such acts are un-Islamic.<sup>362</sup> Mostly influenced by the Bareilvi Islamic theology, which is infused with Sufi elements that celebrate compassion and acceptance of others, the Dargah issued an urgent need to completely ban all terror groups like ISIS, al-Qaeda, and the Taliban. The most powerful religious message coming out of the Dargah-e-Aala Hazrat is that *namaz-e-janaza*, or funeral prayer, will not be recited for those involved in terrorism.<sup>363</sup> In the madrassa run by the Dargah a course is taught titled

“Hadith and Terrorism,” in which students compare original Qur’anic texts with those offered by terror groups to understand how terror groups misrepresent or only use limited portions of the Qur’an that support their point of view, to the exclusion of those that don’t.

The role of Sufi Islam or Sufism is strong in India. Indian Hindus and Muslims both deeply revere Sufi saints of the Hazrat Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti order, like Shirdi Sai Baba. The main belief of the Chisti order is “Love towards all, malice towards none.”<sup>364</sup> Sufism accepts all religions, and this expression of universal tolerance and acceptance has seeped into the everyday expression of faith in India. Besides the influence of Sufism, prominent member of India’s most powerful Muslim organization, the All India Muslim Personal Law Board, and noted scholar, Maulana Khalid Saifullah Rahmani, stated: “There is no space for ISIS ideology in our religion. The inhuman activities of the ISIS go against the teachings of Islam.”<sup>365</sup> The founder of the Islamic Educational Welfare Society, Mohammad Abdul Rahoof Khan, stated: “We are Indians and as per the teachings of Islam we should live harmoniously with people from other religions. Hurting others is not permissible in Islam.”<sup>366</sup> Statements from influential clerics rejecting ISIS have had a deep impact on Indian Muslim youth. In fact, Indian clerics and Muslims citizens have so succeeded in rejecting ISIS that they drew the group’s anger. In a recent video aimed at Indian Muslim clerics and citizens, ISIS threatened to attack India and urged Indian Muslims to reject false calls by its clerics. Indian clerics and political parties representing the Indian Muslims rejected the video.<sup>367</sup> After having his image shown with dead bodies in the ISIS video, Badruddin Ajmal, the president of All India United Democratic Front, a political party that represents Muslims in Assam, stated:

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*In the madrassa run by the Dargah, a course is taught titled “Hadith and Terrorism,” in which students compare original Qur’anic texts with those offered by terror groups to understand how terror groups misrepresent or only use limited portions of the Qur’an that support their point of view, to the exclusion of those that don’t.*

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An unIslamic organization like ISIS shouldn’t lecture us on our role as leader of the community. It’s better you bunch of killers stop showing concern about Indian Muslims, they don’t need it.

Indian Muslims never supported terrorism in the past, and never will in the future.<sup>368</sup>

Moreover, some of the areas that ISIS has identified as their future zone of operations already house insurgencies, like the Maoists or Naxalites, who would have little time to spare for fundamentalist groups like ISIS. In Northeast India, decades old insurgent groups—like the National Socialist Council of Nagalim, the People’s Liberation Army of Manipur, or the United National Liberation Front—are ethnic insurgencies much older than ISIS and grounded in local ethnic issues. They exhibit zero tolerance for the ISIS kind of religious theology. Both ISIS and AQIS, led by Maulana Asim Umar,<sup>369</sup> have identified Assam, with its tensions between illegal Bangladeshi immigrants and the indigenous communities, as part of their future operational zone, yet, there is no data to show that Muslims of Assam are drawn to ISIS. In fact, in the April 2016 Assam assembly elections, the Muslim community both fielded candidates of their choice to vote from and voted in large numbers.<sup>370</sup>

As mentioned earlier, Mohammad Shafi Umar, the ISIS chief recruiter in India, was a former IM member, the homegrown terror group that took responsibility for multiple terror attacks in India in 2008. Its leader, Yasin Bhatkal, is now in police custody and the IM has perished as an outfit. India’s 1.3-million-strong experienced military will prove too strong for ISIS. The role of Indian COIN agencies in thwarting terror attacks is an important element in the overall societal ability to limit recruitment, propaganda, and terror attacks.

## **The Role of Indian CT Agencies**

There are several Indian CT agencies, including intelligence, military, and the police. Within the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), a special cell called Combating Financing of Terrorism was established in 2011 as part of the Internal Security Division. Its job is to coordinate intelligence on terror financing and target sources of these funds.<sup>371</sup> Two other bodies at the forefront of combating terror funding are the National Crime Records Bureau, under the MHA, and the Financial Intelligence Unit-India, under the Ministry of Finance. Under Article 355 of the Indian constitution, the MHA has the responsibility of ensuring the internal security of the regional states in case armed violence breaks out and the state police are unable to

maintain law and order.<sup>372</sup> The MHA has a separate Department of Internal Security,<sup>373</sup> which is specifically designed to respond to internal violence. In 2008, in the aftermath of the Mumbai terror attacks, the NIA was formed to investigate acts of insurgency and terrorism.<sup>374</sup> The MHA is also responsible for the imposition of special laws under which the armed forces deploy in COIN mode function, namely the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act of 1958, amended in 1972 for the Northeast,<sup>375</sup> and the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act for the State of Jammu and Kashmir, 1990.<sup>376</sup>

The central security agencies utilized for CT and COIN include the central police organizations, like the Central Reserve Police Force, and the central paramilitary forces, like the Border Security Force, the NSG, the Indo Tibetan Border Police, and the Assam Rifles, which all fall under the purview of the MHA, as well as the Indian Army's Rashtriya Rifles. The NSG was established in 1984 "to tackle all facets of terrorism in the country,"<sup>377</sup> and played a prominent role in the Mumbai attacks of 2008. The 51 Special Action Group of the NSG succeeded in thwarting the 2008 Mumbai attack, though post-event analysis suggests that there was a severe lack of focused training, transport helicopters, as well as coordination.<sup>378</sup> As a result, the NSG received policy attention, and five more hubs were established in Mumbai, Kolkata, Hyderabad, Chennai, and Gandhinagar, besides its main hub in Manesar, Gurgaon, in order to decrease response time to terror attacks.<sup>379</sup> Moreover, intelligence reveals that these cities could face future terror strikes.<sup>380</sup>

Besides the NSG, three military branches—the Army, Navy, and Air Force—have special forces units for CT: the Army's PARA (special forces) and PARA Commando units, the Navy's MARCOS (Marine Commandos), and the Air Force's Garuds Commando unit. These special operations units are mostly trained to function behind enemy lines.<sup>381</sup> In June 2015, the PARA Commandos targeted insurgent camps of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Khaplang in the India-Burma border region after a deadly attack by the rebel group on an Indian army convoy in Manipur, killing 18 soldiers.<sup>382</sup> In September 2016, the paratroopers launched a 'surgical strike' on terror bases across the Indian-Pakistan border to prevent cross-border terror attacks. This was a response to a terror attack on an army base in Uri, in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir.<sup>383</sup> The Indian paratroopers have been augmented with a 90-day training schedule to include terrain knowledge, prevailing obstacles, as well as knowledge of several languages.

Other Indian special forces utilized against terrorism include the Central Reserve Police Force's COBRA (Commando Battalion for Resolute Action), the Special Frontier Force, under the Research and Analysis Wing (India's external intelligence agency), and Force One, a special unit within the Mumbai police to counter terror attacks on the city.<sup>384</sup> Force One has been trained by Israeli special forces. In combination with Indian intelligence, the NIA, and local intelligence, these special forces units have limited the impact of terror attacks, although terror attacks have occurred in India against both civilians, which is the usual terror strategy, and military bases.<sup>385</sup> In January 2016, there was a terror attack on the Pathankot Air Force Station, which houses MiG-21 Bison fighter jets and Mi-25 and Mi-35 attack helicopters. In this attack, the NSG lost a lieutenant colonel and six other security personnel. JeM was said to be behind the attack.<sup>386</sup>

With multiple terror groups targeting India, and ISIS planning to spread into India, how the future unfolds will depend on how well Indian society and these CT agencies rise to the challenge.

## Considerations for USSOCOM

The Indian social and political landscape is complex and multifaceted. More importantly, India has faced terror attacks on both its civilians and military over decades. That has created an institutional culture of learning and adapting to this continuous challenge. India's border states in Northeast India, and Jammu and Kashmir in Northwest India, have been suffering from armed insurgencies and terrorism for decades. As a result, a plethora of specialized forces have been established to meet the challenge. When ISIS declared in 2014 that it aims to spread into India via Bangladesh, border security was tightened and intelligence shared with relevant organizations in Bangladesh.

A few considerations can be gleaned from the Indian experience of dealing with terrorism in general, and ISIS in particular, that are of relevance to USSOCOM.

First, partner nations with a modern democratic setup, in which members of the Muslim community are represented, will not be easily persuaded by ISIS's grand declarations of a caliphate. Often, ISIS recruitment has been successful due to the lack of viable alternatives. The Indian example indicates that once state institutions build inclusive mechanisms within them, no matter how imperfect, these institutions have the possibility to represent

those who feel disenfranchised. In such a setting, extremist groups will have an almost negligent draw for these communities. This is vindicated by a Brookings study on *Democracy and Terrorism* which states “that a country’s best defense against terrorism is to improve the legitimacy of the state through more democratic, human rights, and rule of law practices at the local, national, and international levels.”<sup>387</sup>

Second, intelligence gathering by the NIA in India has resulted in averting terror attacks and the arrest of those suspected of supporting terrorism. This intelligence is gathered by both online monitoring and on-site local networks. Such intelligence

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*The Indian example indicates that once state institutions build inclusive mechanisms within them, no matter how imperfect, these institutions have the possibility to represent those who feel disenfranchised.*

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has proved vital to targeting sources of funding, the supply chain of illegal weapons, and recruitment to terror outfits. USSOCOM could exchange ‘best practices’ with India under a CT agreement. This kind of collaboration is crucial, as ISIS recognizes no borders and could aim at collaborating with local terror units across regions.

Third, al-Qaeda’s announcement of AQIS coincided with al-Baghdadi’s declaration of the Islamic caliphate. At the same time, ISIS’s goals in India coincided with the 55-minute video message by al-Qaeda chief al-Zawahiri. In the message, he identified Indian Muslims as a persecuted lot in Assam, Kashmir, and Gujarat, as well as in Burma and Bangladesh. He stated that “your brothers ... did not forget you and that they are doing what they can to rescue you.”<sup>388</sup> Al-Zawahiri also pointed out, without specifically mentioning ISIS, the dangers of division amongst the jihadist groups and called for unity instead. Yet, the societal support from Indian Muslims to Wahhabi-inspired groups like ISIS or al-Qaeda is limited. Hence, in the nearly four years since both ISIS and al-Qaeda announced their goals to expand into India, very little has been achieved in terms of physical presence. The role of Indian Muslim organizations in rejecting terrorism has a real-time effect. Such organizations should exist in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, as well. The challenge for USSOCOM will be to identify and include such anti-ISIS Muslim groups into its mission goals of containing recruitment and advancement of ISIS ideology, both online and offline.

Finally, besides political and social factors, fighting terrorism requires firepower, training in unconventional strategy, and superior intelligence analysis to counter unpredictable violence. Since civilians are the major targets of terror groups, the intelligence required to avert such attacks are the focal point of CT missions. Gathering intelligence is not easy, however. The central point of intelligence collection should ideally be local units with cultural expertise, community sensitivity, and an ability to weed out misleading leads. It is in this domain of intelligence sharing and creating actionable leads that USSOCOM and Indian special forces can work together under a framework agreement on intelligence sharing. Since the adversary (ISIS) is common, it makes sense to sketch out a common doctrine. The 2009 India-U.S. Counterterrorism Cooperation Initiative provides an overarching framework to further this goal.<sup>389</sup>

## Chapter 5. Resistance to ISIS Ideology and Recruitment in Indonesia

One of the key insights important to the USSOCOM mission of countering extremist groups like ISIS is understanding why the group fails in Muslim countries like Indonesia. This knowledge is specifically critical to accomplishing the core activity of MISO. MISO is aimed at influencing the emotions, motives, and objective reasoning of foreign audiences and governments.<sup>390</sup> The knowledge offered in this chapter helps identify vital interjection points required to not only keep violent extremism from spreading, but also to ensure long-term substantive conflict prevention. Understanding the role of local actors in questioning extremist ideologies propagated by ISIS helps shape and enhance conditions that work against violent extremist actors setting down roots and taking over territory. For instance, if Sunni groups in Mosul, Iraq, had been adequately represented in local government structures, it is more likely that ISIS social networks would have been detected early in order to deter them from taking hold of the city with such devastating consequences for its inhabitants. As of the writing of this monograph, the battle for Mosul, Iraq, against ISIS has ended with the Iraqi and U.S. militaries reclaiming the city.<sup>391</sup> The role of USSOCOM in the fight against ISIS grows more critical with each passing day. Added to 5,000 military advisors, trainers, and attack helicopters in Iraq, are 200 personnel from a Marine artillery unit, deployed on the outskirts of Raqqa, the headquarters of ISIS.<sup>392</sup> They worked in collaboration with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to wrest Raqqa from ISIS. The mission objective of USSOCOM is to work in a partner capacity with Syrian local forces, primarily focused on training and assisting them.

It is in this area of building partner capacity that a country like Indonesia fits as a case for analysis in the fight against ISIS. While Indonesia is not part of the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, it views its fight against ISIS in ideological terms, as a battle between moderate and radical Islam. Arto Suryodipuro, the Deputy Chief of Mission at the Indonesian Embassy in the United States, highlighted this aspect in March 2016 when he said that Indonesia and the U.S. could expand bilateral cooperation by

sharing more ideas about this approach, especially through the bilateral establishment of a Council on Religion and Pluralism.<sup>393</sup>

Significantly, although Indonesia is the country with the largest Muslim population in the world and was included in the 2014 ISIS map for territorial expansion, it has witnessed very few recruits to ISIS. With a total population of 258.3 million, 87.2 percent of which are Muslim,<sup>394</sup> Indonesia has seen only about 700 ISIS recruits.<sup>395</sup> In contrast to Tunisia, Russia, Germany, France, and Saudi Arabia, this is a low percentage of their population. Indonesian ISIS leaders, like Bachrumsyah Mennor Usman, Bahrun Naim, and Gigih Rahmat Dewa (Dewa is in custody in Indonesia), operated from Iraq and Syria through terror cells.<sup>396</sup> While this poses an existential security threat to Indonesia, given Indonesian ISIS recruits can function with impunity from outside bases and succeed in drawing local recruits and resources, their hold on the Indonesian psyche is limited. On the other hand, Abu Bakar Bashir of al-Qaeda-linked JI, an Indonesian leader of Yemeni descent, operates inside Indonesia and inspires a following, especially through his membership in Darul Islam, which advocates the adoption of sharia law in Indonesia, and the Indonesian Mujahedeen Council.<sup>397</sup> The Indonesian government had trouble convicting him of terrorism-related charges, but, he was finally convicted and sentenced to 15 years in prison in 2011 for funding an extremist training camp in Aceh.<sup>398</sup>

ISIS does have some influence in Indonesia. ISIS leader al-Baghdadi appointed Indonesian jihadi leader Bachrumsyah to be leader of the ISIS Southeast Asia battalion, called the Katibah Nusantara Lid Daulah Islamiyah. Bahrun, an Indonesian ISIS member, traveled to Syria, and once there, discussed travel plans for potential Indonesian ISIS recruits with Gigih Dewa, another Indonesian ISIS member. Gigih, in order to avoid detection, named his terror cell Katibah Gonggong Rebus, or Boiled Snail Cells. Gigih's cell was planning a terror attack on Marina Bay, Singapore, when it was detected by Indonesian CT officials in July 2016.<sup>399</sup> Indonesia-based Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD)<sup>400</sup> is a 2015 formed cluster organization of Indonesian extremist groups who have pledged allegiance to ISIS. JAD is believed to be led by Aman Abdurrahman, another former JI ideologue who drew in Indonesian recruits to ISIS with his charismatic sermons, even while he was jailed. The resurgent JI appears to have similar goals with ISIS like its desire to establish a state based on pure Islam where sharia laws apply. It is pertinent to point out that JI is locally based and views ISIS as a rival.<sup>401</sup>

Several terror plots have been deterred in Indonesia by the elite Detachment 88 CT unit, created in 2003 and trained, in part, by U.S. forces. The foiled plots include ISIS-aligned terror strikes planned for December 2016 in front of the presidential palace, at Jakarta's Soekarno-Hatta International Airport, and at the Burma embassy.<sup>402</sup>

Al-Muhajiroun affiliated with Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HT)	East Indonesia Mujahideen (MIT)
East Java Partisans of the Caliphate (Ansharul Khilafah Jawa Timur)	Forum Aktivistis Syariah Islam (FAKSI/ Tauhid Waljihad)
Front Pembala Islam (FPI)	Garis Gerakan Reformis Islam (GARIS/Tauhid Waljihad)
Jemaah Anshar Khilafah (JAK)	Jemaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD)
Jemaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT)	Jemaah Ansharusy Syariah (JAS)
Jemaah Islamiya (JI) gave allegiance in 2014 later rescinded it	Katibah Gonggong Rebus (KGR)
Katibah Nusantara	Kembang Kuning Prisoners, Nusakambangan, for example, Aman Abdurrahman and Abu Ba'asyir
Laskar Jundullah (KPSI Sulawesi)	Mujahidin Indonesia Barat (MIB)
Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT)	Negara Islam Indonesia
Ring Batem	sharia4Indonesia
Wahdah Islamiyah	West Indonesia Mujahideen (MIB)

With pressure on ISIS to relinquish territory in Iraq and Syria, there are concerns that terror cells will spread to countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Yet, despite individual efforts to cause terror and establish organized radical networks, as mentioned above, ISIS has proved unable to spread its networks in Indonesia. Indonesian Muslim civil society groups have rejected ISIS ideology and limited both its physical spread and ideological appeal. The prevailing structural conditions in Indonesia, discussed in this chapter, have worked against extremist groups like ISIS, and identifies critical insights from the Indonesian experience against ISIS for USSOCOM. These insights include the methods used to foil terror plots, as well as the strategies adopted by Indonesian communities against ISIS-type radicalization.

## ISIS Goals in Indonesia

ISIS made itself visible on Indonesian television news coverage by claiming responsibility for the January 2016 attacks in Jakarta. Until then, JI, which was responsible for the 2002 Bali bombings, was the main act on the stage of Indonesian terrorism. With the entry of ISIS, the potential for Indonesians to travel to Iraq and Syria and plot attacks back home has become a serious possibility.<sup>404</sup> ISIS considers Indonesia un-Islamic, or not *Dawla Islamiya* (Islamic State), according to Indonesian national police chief Tito Karnavian.<sup>405</sup> Moreover, Karnavian asserts that unlike al-Qaeda, ISIS legitimizes the killing of Muslims who are viewed as infidels.<sup>406</sup> Significantly, the religious-laced ideology of ISIS stands in contrast to Indonesia's state philosophy, Pancasila, which includes "belief in the one and only God, just and civilized humanity, the unity of Indonesia, democracy guided by the inner wisdom in the unanimity arising out of deliberations amongst representatives, social justice for the whole of the people of Indonesia."<sup>407</sup> ISIS aims to take over Indonesia and impose sharia law. In pursuit of these goals, several lone wolves have been recruited, including women like Dian Yulia Novi, who could have been Indonesia's first female suicide bomber had she not been detected and arrested in December 2016 by Detachment 88.<sup>408</sup>

ISIS is encouraging both men and women to carry out individual attacks in its name. Moreover, the rise of Islamic groups after the 1998 democratization of Indonesia, like the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), could theoretically create conditions for a quick transition to terrorism. FPI shares the goal of ISIS to impose sharia on Indonesia, and both aim for a caliphate in Indonesia.<sup>409</sup> The spread of Saudi-funded Wahhabi education in Indonesia could dismantle the relaxed and pluralistic Islam prevalent there, in favor of a hard-core fundamentalism that has little time for other Islamic interpretations, let alone other religions.<sup>410</sup> The Institute for the Study of Islam and Arabic, a university funded by the Saudis in Jakarta, offers scholarships for students to continue higher studies in Salafism, including a scholarship to Riyadh. Another Saudi funded organization is the Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia (the Indonesian Society for the Propagation of Islam). This organization preaches anti-Shia, anti-Christian and anti-Ahmadiyah perspectives.<sup>411</sup> Schools like al-Mukmim, in Java, teach a radical Islam that includes sharia law. Its founder is JI's Abu Bakr Bashir, who pledged allegiance to ISIS. While the exact number is not known, yet dozens of Al-Mukmim's

teachers and students are known to have engaged in terrorism, including Riduan Isamuddin, better known as Hambali.<sup>412</sup> One of the highest profile ISIS supporters was Al-Mukhim teacher, Afif Abdul Majid, who was arrested on 9 August 2014.<sup>413</sup> Majid had traveled to Syria and lived there with ISIS for several months, pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi, before returning to Indonesia to preach ISIS ideology. Al-Mukhim is part of the Ngruki Foundation, founded in 1972 that runs not only schools but also medical centers and has a long history of political activism that goes beyond Bashir.<sup>414</sup> Al-Mukhim is a boarding school that houses nearly 2,000 students between 12 and 18 years old. The school did not recognize the Indonesian state or the flag and refused to embrace the country's guiding philosophy of Pancasila. The teachers in the school stressed the importance of establishing an Islamic state. Some of the students in the school were sent for military training in JI run camps in Philippines.<sup>415</sup> Such schools continue to flourish and may result in the radicalization of students, especially through teachings on jihad, war and violence.

In January 2016, ISIS claimed responsibility for attacks in Jakarta in which four civilians and five terrorists were killed.<sup>416</sup> It is alleged that Bahrin planned the attacks from Raqqa, Syria.<sup>417</sup> This attack simulated the November 2015 Paris attack, and was meant to inflict maximum terror. By successfully carrying out these attacks, ISIS aims to create the perception that it can utilize its local members in different countries to deadly effect. ISIS glorifies the successful targeting of innocent civilians in terror strikes, and the perpetrators, mostly in suicide missions, are portrayed as martyrs. There are few examples of terrorists targeting trained, competent, and efficient police units or special forces. To the advantage of ISIS, the killing of civilians in a democracy has a huge political effect.

It requires just one successful terror attack for panic and a fear of ISIS's presence to spread, and the January 2016 Jakarta attacks were aimed at achieving that purpose. Instead, after the attack, the Indonesian people rallied around the hashtags #KamiTidakTakut and #WeAreNotAfraid.<sup>418</sup> Moreover, the terror attack was badly executed, with all four terrorists killed. Planned by Bahrin—a former member of Hizb-ut-Tahrir who is now leader of the Katibah Nusantara, a Southeast Asian ISIS cell based in Syria—the attack was meant to augment both the presence of ISIS and Bahrin's reputation within the ISIS ranks, but ended up as a failure.

The brand of Salafi Islam that ISIS projects, including its puritanical and literal reading of the Qur'an, has limited appeal in the sociocultural and political setting of Indonesia. The structural conditions in Indonesia, where Muslims are represented well in society, limits the allure of ISIS, especially its promises of returning the dignity of Muslims and removing their feelings of disenfranchisement.<sup>419</sup> Even the idea of caliphate based on sharia has limited appeal, and is not good enough to sway many Indonesians, given their own cultural rootedness and traditions. Indonesian Muslims do not feel alienated or threatened by a majority, because they are the majority, unlike France or Germany, where Muslims are the minority. Moreover, those fringe extremist groups that support or give allegiance to ISIS are disparate groups with sporadic networking and multiple claims to leadership, including Bahrun, Bachrumsyah, and Abu Jandal. Having several claimants to leadership of

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the Indonesian version of ISIS results in internal competition to showcase each's ability to orchestrate violence, which in turn could be manipulated by the ISIS core leadership.

The Indonesian political and sociocultural conditions have worked to keep the impact of radical violent extremism limited.<sup>420</sup> Foremost amongst those groups that have a positive influence are Muslim civil society organizations, like Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)<sup>421</sup> and the Brotherhood

Forum of the Indonesian Council of Religious Scholars, that have visibly rejected ISIS. Besides civil society groups, Indonesian extremist groups like JI have not given their allegiance to ISIS, and instead continue to look toward al-Qaeda and al-Nusra. The political conditions in post-Suharto Indonesia have created firewalls against the ISIS kind of extreme violence, and the superior intelligence gathering and CT efforts of the Indonesian special forces have averted several ISIS terror strikes.<sup>422</sup> In a 2015 Pew Research Center poll, 79 percent of Indonesians viewed ISIS unfavorably while 4 percent viewed it favorably.<sup>423</sup>

## Indonesian Civil Society's Response to ISIS

It is quite significant to note that Indonesian pro-ISIS ideologue Aman Abdurrahman, imprisoned in Indonesia's Nusakambangan island prison

since the 2010 Aceh raid on his terror camp, has successfully published several books from behind bars that are aimed at recruiting Indonesians to ISIS. What is even more astounding is that he may be communicating with Indonesian ISIS leaders in Raqqa, namely Bachrumsyah and Bahrūn.<sup>424</sup> Aman's charisma lies in his knowledge of Islam, his fluency in Arabic, and the respect he draws in extremist circles. He utilized JAD to continue his work from prison helping ISIS establish its footing in Indonesia by translating their propaganda and ideology into Bahasa Indonesia.<sup>425</sup> Three of the men Aman has inspired are Bachrumsyah, who styles himself as commander of the Western Indonesia Mujahidin; Santoso, a former JI member who led the insurgency movement called Eastern Indonesia Mujahidin, and Bahrūn. Also included in Aman's sphere of extremist influence is Salim Mubarak at-Tamimi, a.k.a. Abu Jandal, who joined ISIS in Syria.<sup>426</sup> The problem with the Takfiri doctrine that Aman propagates, as pointed out by Indonesian national police chief Karnavian, is that it obligates Muslims to kill all other Muslims who they perceive as not following their version of true Islam.<sup>427</sup>

Into this plausible scenario of the spread of ISIS-inspired extremism, enter Indonesian civil society groups like NU and Brotherhood Forum of the Indonesian Council of Religious Scholars. NU was founded in 1926, largely to counter Wahhabism, and now projects Islamic principles of tolerance, socioeconomic development and pluralism.<sup>428</sup> NU categorically states that its mission is to counter extremism, and curb terrorism and radicalism. With a membership of 50 million Sunni Muslims, the impact of NU on Indonesian politics and society is high. Former Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid served as its general chairman in 1984 and present Vice President of Indonesia Jusuf Kalla is a member of its advisory board.<sup>429</sup> NU's political wing, the National Awakening Party, formed in 1999, played a major role in creating the foundations of the pluralistic Indonesian state.<sup>430</sup> NU has set up 'prevention centers' in Indonesia to counter radical ideologies online, especially those written and spread in Arabic. NU propagates Islam Nusantara or East Indies Islam, the Indonesian version of Islam that highlights nonviolence, inclusive living, and most importantly, acceptance of other religions.<sup>431</sup> According to Yahya Cholil Staquf, the general secretary of the NU Supreme Council, NU "is directly challenging the idea of ISIS, which wants Islam to be uniform, meaning that if there is any other idea of Islam that is not following their ideas, those people are infidels who must be killed."<sup>432</sup>

Indonesian scholars on Islamic studies throw light on Arab attitudes of racism toward non-Arab Muslims, especially highlighting Arab assertions that they are the only true Muslims. NU directly questions the ISIS projection of Islam, especially its assertion that the Qur'an sanctions its acts, including beheadings. ISIS, which is Sunni Muslim, categorically states that all others, including Shia Muslims, are infidels. On the contrary, NU, which is also Sunni Muslim, states that in the Sunni version of Islam, religion is expressed in love and conformity to other human beings, especially imbued with compassion. NU is active online, posting videos and articles that directly confront ISIS in the language it uses, Arabic. A recent video by NU, titled *Rahmat Islam Nusantara* or *The Divine Grace of Islam*<sup>433</sup> includes an ISIS beheading clip, countered directly by the inclusive narrative of the former chairman of the NU Supreme Council, KH A. Mustofa Bisri.<sup>434</sup> While acknowledging the legitimacy of the ISIS representation of Qur'anic scriptures, Indonesian scholars state that the ISIS version of 7th century Islam is not relevant to the 21st century. Therein lies a fundamental problem: ISIS would assert that its religious discourses are legitimate and question the authority of NU to decide which version of Islam is relevant. ISIS claims that it represents the Prophet's word as it is, and do not interpret it, focusing on a literal reading of the Qur'an and the Hadith.<sup>435</sup>

NU, with its powerful credibility and legitimacy in Indonesia grounded in its 91-year history, social work, and adherence and commitment to Islam, cannot be wished away by ISIS. Comparatively, ISIS is a new (2014), unilaterally declared caliphate, mostly led by Iraqis. ISIS is not going to suddenly dominate the Indonesian imagination simply because they claim to be a caliphate established by Allah. In questioning the legitimacy and ideology of ISIS, NU has the numbers, Islamic legitimacy, and knowledge of Sunni theology to evoke a strong counter response.<sup>436</sup>

The Brotherhood Forum of the Indonesian Council of Religious Scholars also has been at the forefront of rejecting ISIS.<sup>437</sup> They state that the ISIS version of Sunni Islam is completely at odds with the Indonesian identity, which is based on an Islam that preaches compassion and tolerance. Indonesian scholars on Islam visibly articulate their tolerant version of Islam and locate it vis-à-vis the ISIS version, directly questioning the latter's legitimacy. Added to this societal resistance are Indonesian political conditions. For instance, Indonesian Religious Affairs Minister Lukman Hakim Saifuddin specified that, in his scrutiny of Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia, those that

teach radicalism and violence cannot call themselves Islamic.<sup>438</sup> This leads us to the next section, which highlights the political factors in Indonesia working against the ISIS ideology.

## The Political Conditions in Post-Suharto Indonesia

When Indonesia became a democracy in 1998, after the fall of the Suharto dictatorship of nearly three decades, there were fears that the immensely diverse country of 250 million people would not stay together. There were violent confrontations between the military and separatists, with the military refusing to give up its violent campaigns. Added to this were the business interests of the military, which was committed to maintaining its position of privilege,<sup>439</sup> and rising tensions between Christians and Muslims. Separatism raised its head in Bali, Minahasa, the Moluccas, Aceh, etc. In this situation, Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid could not afford to lose territory, so he played a distinct role in ensuring that rights of minorities were protected in the democratic structure of Indonesia. Unlike Iraq's first Shia Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki, who incited a sectarian divide that has left Iraqi Shias and Sunnis estranged, Wahid was a champion of multiculturalism and pluralism. Wahid, as Indonesia's first elected president, ensured that respect for a diversity of views, ideas, religions, and thought, were institutionalized into the Indonesian state. His experience, reforming the NU as chairman in the 1980s, held him in good stead to steer Indonesia's path to an inclusive and vibrant democracy. It was Wahid who, contrary to the ISIS edict that democracy is *haram*, meaning forbidden, declared that "Democracy is not only not haram in Islam, but is a compulsory element of Islam. Upholding democracy is one of the principles of Islam."<sup>440</sup>

The role of former Indonesian presidents Megawati Sukarnoputri, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, and the present president, Joko Widodo (Jokowi), in strengthening Indonesia's democracy and pluralism have been immense. All three presidents demonstrated leadership in admitting to issues like poverty, corruption, and inequality, and adopted measures to address them. The repressive laws of the Suharto regime against minorities were removed, and freedom of the press was ensured. A liberal version of Islam was encouraged, especially one that accepted plurality of thought, culture, and tradition.<sup>441</sup> Instead of banning Islamist parties, Indonesia is open to them joining the government, provided they can win. Islamist politicians who are co-opted

into governing tend to be weak at daily political strategy and are exposed for what they are—ordinary people rather than the embodiment of the mystical allure they project in their speeches, making tall promises of spiritual and political liberation. For instance, in 2013, the former leader of the Islamist Prosperous Justice Party, Luthfi Hasan Ishaq, was sentenced to 16 years in prison for taking bribes.<sup>442</sup>

Indonesia lends itself to a complex mosaic of values and thoughts, steeped in an Islam that permeated the landscape in the 13th century, and which interspersed with other religions and cultures to take on a moderate view on faith. The willingness of major politicians in Indonesia to represent their constituencies, without taking on religious expressions of politics, limits the appeal of groups like ISIS. Significantly, in a 2013 Pew Research Center survey, 72 percent of Indonesians favored sharia (the revealed word of God) as the official law of the land and had become more devout in their religious practices.<sup>443</sup> This should naturally ring

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alarm bells. However, 44 percent of Indonesians believe there are multiple interpretations of sharia. Moreover, they wanted sharia to be limited to property and family disputes for Muslims. The favorable percentage comes down drastically when sharia penalties for theft and adultery are concerned. Fifty-four percent of Indonesians believed that their present official laws followed sharia. In a 2015 Pew Research Center survey, 83

percent of Indonesians supported religious freedom for all and believed in democracy.<sup>444</sup> It is this belief in their democracy, in which Indonesians feel adequately represented, that limits their predisposition to the ideology of ISIS or other Islamic extremists.

## Indonesian CT Special Units

One of the patterns that emerges from a study of Indonesia's success in frustrating ISIS efforts to spread its presence and ideology in the country is the role of its special forces CT units. Detachment 88, established in 2002 in the aftermath of the Bali bombings, has been successful in thwarting several ISIS-inspired plots. The unit succeeded in 2010 in eliminating the terrorist Dulmatin, the top JI leader responsible for the planning of the Bali

bombings.<sup>445</sup> Detachment 88 was the core force behind the 2010 Aceh raid on a terrorist training camp that led to the arrest of JI jihadi ideologues Aman Abdurrahman and Abu Bakar Bashir. Detachment 88 was responsible for busting an al-Qaeda in Aceh terror camp in the jungles of Sumatra in 2010. Most of its terror raids are conducted based on intensive intelligence gathered by intermingling with the people. Moreover, members of Detachment 88 participate in anti-radicalization programs, offering spiritual counternarratives to arrested militants. The legal framework utilized do not rely on special terror laws, but the normal Indonesian court system. Interestingly, members of the police unit participate with terror suspects in prayers while in jail, thereby forming connections that could help in deradicalization efforts.<sup>446</sup>

In December 2016, Detachment 88 successfully uncovered a terror plot to attack the Parliament, police headquarters, Burma embassy, a Buddhist temple, and a local TV station by ISIS-affiliated terrorists. The four members of JAD believed to be behind the plot—Rio Priatna Wibawa, Saiful Bahri, Bahrain Agam, and Hendra Rizki—were arrested.<sup>447</sup> Detachment 88 has succeeded in foiling 54 terror attacks since 2010. In August 2016, an ISIS-inspired terror plot, in Batam, Indonesia, to attack the Marina Bay area in Singapore was foiled.

Detachment 88's training headquarters is located in Semarang on the island of Java. It consists of about 400 to 500 elite members, including bomb specialists, intelligence gatherers, and weapons specialists, and is equipped with state-of-the-art weaponry and intelligence gathering devices. The unit has benefited from about \$200 million in assistance from Indonesian allies like Australia and the U.S., including intelligence sharing.<sup>448</sup> Led by a core task force of 30 senior officers, Detachment 88 prioritizes superior military intelligence, especially in online communications, and is filled with police personnel having doctorates in social psychology. While not immune to accusations of human rights abuses, especially during interrogations of terror suspects, the success of the terror unit works in its favor.<sup>449</sup>

Another CT special unit, established in 2015, is the Joint Special Operations Command, or Koopsusgab.<sup>450</sup> It is stationed at Sentul, West Java, and comprises 81 specially trained CT military personnel from the Indonesian Navy, Army, and Air Force special forces. The Koopsusgab is manned by the military, unlike Detachment 88, which is a police-driven unit, raising concerns over turf battles.<sup>451</sup> That said, the Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Terorisme, Indonesia's national counter-terrorism agency, is led by national

police chief Tito Karnavian, who has a doctorate in terrorism and Islamic radicalization, and successfully led the police effort to dismantle JI. Tito has highlighted the importance of counternarratives to ISIS's radicalism, especially prioritizing a community-drawn narrative.<sup>452</sup>

## Considerations for USSOCOM

ISIS's challenge to Indonesia is real, given that 22 Indonesian terror groups have pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi. The spread of Saudi-funded Wahhabi Islam could result in the growth of a puritanical Islam. ISIS aspires to take over the space occupied by al-Qaeda-linked JI in Indonesia, as is demonstrated by their 2014 map. Former JI leader Bahrun has joined ISIS and directs propaganda targeted at Indonesia from Raqqa, Syria. Yet, the success of Indonesian Nusantara in limiting the spread of ISIS ideology is visible. Indonesian military chief General Gatot Nurmantyo cautioned that ISIS "sleeper cells" have been established in almost every province of the Indonesian archipelago, mostly established by ISIS from the southern Philippine city of Marawi.<sup>453</sup>

Considerations derived from the Indonesian experience that relate to USSOCOM are as follows. First, the U.S. State Department's Antiterrorism Assistance Program, supporting a well-equipped and politically stable counterpart in a partner nation through training, sharing strategies, and intelligence, is critical. This amplifies the FID strategy of USSOCOM that Detachment 88 has benefited from U.S. assistance, in both funding and training the unit, but has managed to keep the U.S. role to a secondary status. That is critical given that Indonesia is a functioning democracy and the role of outside powers should be limited to assistance.

Second, Indonesian special forces, both police and military units, are not only succeeding in operational matters, but also enjoy societal legitimacy because of their Islamic way of life and local roots. For them, it's not simply a job to be accomplished; it's about safeguarding their homeland from the threat ISIS poses. As a result, their passion for the job brings about respect from the population, which in turn wants them to succeed. Exposing ISIS brutalities and the harsh treatment of people living under their rule diminishes the appeal of ISIS. USSOCOM can share best practices for countering extremist groups' propaganda, and further enhance the online capacities of Indonesian partner agencies.

Third, civil society groups, like Indonesia's NU, with its 50 million Sunni members, are effective social counters to ISIS. ISIS is mostly led by Iraqis, and cannot draw the same amount of adherence as locally led civil groups, no matter how much it tries to locate itself within a Qur'anic discourse. NU's direct engagement with ISIS religious discourses and offer of an alternative counter-discourse on Islam, instead of simply brushing aside ISIS as un-Islamic, is a clever, workable strategy.

Fourth, for USSOCOM, the Indonesian example of gathering local intelligence, especially that which helps to deter terror attacks, is something that can be further enhanced. USSOCOM could share their own experiences and COIN techniques with partner-nation (Indonesian) counterparts. Indonesian extremist groups have changed their communications strategy by using hand courier services in order to avoid detection. By blending into local areas where extremist groups function, Detachment 88 has made it possible to gather intelligence. The number of terror attacks in Indonesia has gone down drastically. Between 2002 and 2009, the country suffered five major terrorist attacks killing 251 people and injuring 413.<sup>454</sup> In comparison, between 2010 and 2017, Indonesia suffered three small scale terror attacks killing five people and injuring a dozen.<sup>455</sup> This can be attributed to better policing, intelligence, and international collaboration.

Fifth, the Indonesian political condition offers a better alternative for Muslim representation than ISIS. While ISIS is dictatorial and fundamentalist, the Indonesian state is inclusive and moderate. As a consequence, a large segment of the Muslim population finds ISIS, and its version of brutal governance, ugly.

Sixth, it is important to distinguish between the version of sharia Indonesians want to the ISIS version of sharia. Indonesians want a sharia limited to property and family disputes, but ISIS wants to impose it on all aspects of the human existence, from determining how one dresses to punishments for theft.

Finally, limiting ISIS and defeating the threat it poses requires the combined effort of democratic political resistance, social questioning of its religious discourses, and intelligence-based military operations, including monitoring its online presence. The Indonesian example of resisting the presence and ideology of ISIS is an informative case in this regard.



## Chapter 6. An Effective Response to ISIS

*Written by Robert A. Norton and Greg S. Weaver*

This chapter identifies some of the most feasible strategic responses to extremist groups like ISIS. It is vital to comprehend at the outset that ISIS ideology cannot be completely exterminated. Therefore, it is perhaps wise to focus on how to make that ideology unattractive to the large segments of populations living in conditions that render them susceptible. In the case of India and Indonesia, we learned that the impact of ISIS ideology and stated goals of expansion have limited appeal due to multiple factors. These factors include: religious tolerance, political representation of Muslims in state institutions, economic conditions, constitutional guarantees of safety and well-being, education, effective law enforcement, specific intelligence, and Muslim civil society organizations publicly denouncing ISIS ideology and designating it as haram. Such strong statements impact the draw of ISIS and severely limit their appeal. Insights drawn from earlier chapters reveal that, in addition to a strong presence of state forces and CT agencies, one effective method of countering ISIS is exposing them and visibly questioning their religiously based narratives. In this, India's Darul Uloom Deoband, the largest Muslim seminary in Asia and highly influential in India, issued a fatwa against ISIS, declaring it un-Islamic. The fatwa was signed by 1,000 imams across India.<sup>456</sup> Similarly, in Indonesia, the NU, the largest Sunni Muslim social organization, denounces ISIS.<sup>457</sup>

Yet, ISIS has carried out attacks in both India and Indonesia, struck inside Bangladesh, and identified Burma as the next base for their expansion. Given that the physical presence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria was heavily challenged by the U.S.-led coalition, especially by the retaking of Mosul, Iraq, and the battle for Raqqa, Syria, it is likely the extremist group will turn to areas outside of the Middle East to bide its time and regroup.<sup>458</sup> Significantly, on 21 June 2017, ISIS destroyed the medieval mosque in Mosul, from where its leader, al-Baghdadi, declared a caliphate in 2014 and announced himself as caliph.<sup>459</sup> Does that mean that ISIS is acknowledging defeat, as interpreted by Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi?<sup>460</sup>

Experts studying the group are concerned that, if defeated in Iraq and Syria, ISIS members—especially the thousands of foreign fighters—will return home. Those who return from a conflict zone will carry their training home with them, as well as extremist views, and the conditions at home—say, in France, the UK, or Central Asia—may not offer optimal conditions for a fundamentalist Salafist daily existence.<sup>461</sup> Some may become true defectors, while others may blend into societies back home and then carry out terror attacks. Foreign fighters will continue to maintain social media communications with ISIS core leaders back in Iraq and Syria, and may carry out lone wolf attacks to register the group's continued presence.

This chapter analyzes these scenarios and emphasizes the critical necessity of continuously and persistently countering ISIS messaging, especially in the cyber domain. For sure, ISIS will reinvent itself; the response, therefore, should be both tactical and strategic. With its loss of territory in Iraq and Syria, ISIS is adapting and morphing toward a less centralized and

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more equivocal ideological message.

It remains to be seen how this shift will affect actions and behavior. A primary strategy found in ISIS messaging is to foster the idea of religious purity, using violence as a means of purging the kuffar and Christians, as described in

detail in the 2004 online publication, *Management of Savagery*,<sup>462</sup> allegedly written by jihadist strategist Abu Bakr Naji (believed to be Muhammad Khalil Al-Hakaymah). Similarly, in 2015, Zainab Mai-Bornu wrote:

The modernity and simple sophistication deployed by ISIS help shape and reconstruct the unique religious identities of the target audience. They achieve this through the creation of a sense of belonging by simply calling out to their target audience to come home to a land of peace, love and join their brothers from other parts of the world for the cause of no other but Allah (God). The impact achieved by ISIS through the use of new media serves to escalate the conflicts between Western countries and ISIS. The group is recruiting more young boys and girls from Western countries, which in the end, produces a culture of hate and enmity between these youths and their home countries.<sup>463</sup>

Whereas cyber threats from nation-state adversaries, including China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea, could be categorized within the realm of an ‘advanced persistent threat’ domain,<sup>464</sup> ISIS is perhaps the first and most advanced cyber-battlefield messaging adversary. The cyber element is inextricably tied to most of what ISIS does or accomplishes, resulting in economies of effort, force protection, agility, and adaptability. Writing for the Center for Complex Operations, Maeghin Alarid describes the process of online radicalization and recruiting used by ISIS as having:

great advantages over the traditional (and riskier) public communications. Terrorist groups can reach out to an incalculably vast audience. With no travel required, cost is minimal, no logistics or transportation support is needed, and the odds of detection are low. And the newly radicalized need not necessarily pack up and head for the Middle East—jihadi groups encourage attacks at home to avoid the risk of infiltration while traveling.

The threshold for engaging in cyber jihad is markedly lower than for someone who gives up a familiar, comfortable life to travel to an actual battle zone and risk death or capture. If the notion of online activism as a proper, respectable, and sufficient form of jihad wins wide acceptance within radical circles, we can expect ever-increasing efforts in online propaganda and cyber attacks. This could further inspire yet more individuals, facilitating both radicalization and recruitment, and lead to a new cycle of attacks.<sup>465</sup>

It is agreed, both within and outside of the military and government that attempts by the United States and its allies to counter ISIS messaging efforts have largely failed.<sup>466</sup> The reasons for this failure are many, but Boaz Ganor notes that external, U.S.-led efforts to shape opinion are unlikely to succeed because, to put it bluntly, the West is not viewed as having legitimacy over the Islamic State or, for that matter, over Islam itself.<sup>467</sup> Evidence of a similar theme can be found in an important article by Hagan, Kaiser, and Hanson, who suggest that cynicism associated with U.S. coalition attacks (particularly if civilians were involved) has led to not only decreased support, but in some cases to retaliatory violence.<sup>468</sup>

As the adversary becomes more dispersed—particularly if ISIS-held territory continues to decline—social media will no doubt be an important element in efforts to promote ideals and influence others. As Alarid notes:

Terrorist groups have good reason to use social media, whose popularity suits them in many ways ... the Internet is fast overtaking conventional forms of media such as books, magazines, and television to become the leading research and entertainment platform. Social media outlets allow them to present themselves as just another part of mainstream news. Most social media platforms are easy to use and cost little or nothing. With them, terrorists can tailor their message to narrow audience niches, enlisting the help of the virtual world to enter the homes of millions of people.<sup>469</sup>

If expanded social media use indeed becomes reality, this sole element will make modified messaging efforts more difficult, because the virtualized environment expands perhaps by magnitudes, severely reducing the likelihood for the development of some completely new counter-messaging strategy.

The counter-ISIS messaging strategy, even where present in Islamic countries, also cannot be viewed as effective, as the numbers of fighters increased (i.e., recruiting efforts were successful) in the early to mid-years of territorial gains in Syria and Iraq. The message associated with being on a “winning team” proved popular and supplanted any counter messaging. It successfully fed into the operative religious narrative continually propagated by ISIS, which is strongly reinforcing their belief that Allah was blessing the territorial gains and, therefore, the group and people that became part of the group, or in many ways, the tribe. Alarid describes the ease with which the radicalization process is accomplished with some individuals:

The common denominator seems to be that everyone who is radicalized and recruited online feels sympathetic toward the group’s cause, and people who feel there is “something missing” from their lives appear to be more susceptible than others. Radicalization is more widespread where conditions of inequality and political frustration prevail. It often takes root in people who sympathize with the plight of the oppressed and wish to show their solidarity. Radicalized men and women alike often feel despair, humiliation, and outrage

over injustice and perceive few options for influencing change. One brief moment of intense emotion evoked in them while they watch a YouTube video of innocent victims in Africa or the Middle East can be all it takes to spark their interest.<sup>470</sup>

The massive tide of fighters into the contested areas of Syria, Iraq, and perhaps even Yemen, has abated somewhat with the new realities of the battlefield being faced by ISIS. This has caused the directional flow of former fighters to trend increasingly toward a return to their countries of origin. Although open documentary data is scant, some evidence indicates a portion of the returning fighters are actually disheartened, having decided the group didn't deliver on their apocalyptic promises for achieving paradise, while another fraction are actually disillusioned from ISIS.<sup>471</sup> If true, these findings would be significant in that these are elements that could be exploited further in psychological operations (PSYOP) and MISO. The purported disenfranchisement is likely in part the result of the purges instigated by ISIS leadership in the wake of battlefield losses,<sup>472</sup> or perhaps more obscurely, following events where top leadership is being targeted, like the poisoning incidents reported in 2014 and 2015,<sup>473</sup> or the more recent rumored poisoning of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in October 2016.<sup>474</sup>

Purges have been initiated in an attempt to ferret out spies following the U.S.-led coalition's successful targeting and killing of top ISIS commanders, such as Abu Hayjaa al-Tunsi, "minister of war" Omar al-Shishani, Iraqi jihadi Shaker Wuhayeb, and top finance official Abu Ali al-Anbari.<sup>475</sup> These purges have also reportedly caused a significant number of fighters, including some close to top ISIS leadership, to flee out of fear that they would be targeted next by ISIS purists. Paranoia within ISIS leadership, a highly desirable state from the U.S.-led coalition's perspective, has been present since Mohammed Emwazi (a.k.a. Jihadi John) was successfully targeted in Raqqa in 2015, despite his constant movement between safe houses. The increasing paranoia creates an advantage that can be further fostered to encourage internecine conflict within ISIS.

Given the changes that appear to be happening, there is significant reason for optimism. Battlefield losses are inevitably changing the ISIS narrative. It is no longer the invincible foe it might once have seemed to potential recruits. With this nascent change in perception, one must wonder whether the battlefield defeats and territorial losses have led to a questioning within

the ranks, perhaps implying to those who are sympathetic, but do not yet fully embrace ISIS, that the group may indeed not be blessed by Allah, as it so often claims. Although the U.S. must scrupulously avoid this messaging strategy, regional partners are not so constrained and, therefore, might choose to express this theological opinion, even though in the short-term, it may lead to further negative sectarian consequences.<sup>476</sup>

Overall, there appear to be two large categories of ISIS fighters: the hard core, who have passed to the “dark side,” and the less strident, perhaps more fair-weather ISIS patriots, who possibly can be persuaded away from continuing support of the group. The hard-core ISIS members will likely remain largely irretrievable, although recent defections have indicated that even some in this category are subject to persuasion toward self-preservation. For the hardest of the hard-core, targeting by direct action should continue to be expanded and refined, as success there will continue to foment ISIS leadership paranoia by artificially reinforcing the idea that there are spies within the ISIS ranks. Continued success and expansion of direct action operations also becomes the message in itself, further eroding confidence in ISIS leadership competency and morale.

This internal narrative of inevitable ISIS defeat could be fostered further by modified PSYOP and MISO operations in which elements within the ranks are openly identified, while still protecting sources and methods. Significant parallels can be drawn between ISIS, which functions in part as a “virtualized tribe,” and hacker groups, which operate under a different set of priorities. Both succeed only as long as they remain hidden. Exposure brings peril, whether from military or the police, and peril can motivate a shift in behavior toward self-preservation.

Industry-based, cyber-adversary hunter teams have recognized the importance of exposure in countering hacker activities. Many of these teams work in the corporate shadows so as to not become targets themselves, but with the full knowledge of government, a necessary requirement in this very dark world of adversaries. A recent white paper, published by the information security training group SANS, provides a concise description of the reasoning behind the strategy for hunting and exposing cyber adversaries:

Threats are human. It is the adversaries, not just their tools, such as malware, that interest threat hunters. These adversaries are persistent and flexible and often evade network defenses. The threats are often

identified as advanced persistent threats (APTs), not just because of the capabilities that the adversaries wield, but also because of their ability to initiate and maintain long-term operations against targets.

Focused and funded adversaries will not be countered by security boxes on the network alone. And threat hunters are not simply waiting to respond to alerts or indicators of compromise (IOCs). They are actively searching for threats to prevent or minimize damage.<sup>477</sup>

The process of cyber hunting consists of a number of steps, culminating with offensive operations or “active defense,” which includes the Cyber Kill Chain<sup>478</sup> and Diamond Model of Intrusion<sup>479</sup> analyses, processes that first identify and then neutralize the ability of the adversary to continue to act. A key component of this strategy in many operations is the feature of exposure, whereby the person is identified by name, location, and wherever possible, by imagery. The result of such activity is frequently an alteration in behavior. Outed hackers quickly become pariahs in their own social networks. Previous collaborators quickly cease interacting with the ousted subject, out of fear that they will be linked criminally. Potential new collaborations are also discouraged, again motivated by self-preservation.

A particular hunter team leader, interviewed by the author, discussed a recent successful operation that located and identified a group of hackers in an Eastern European nation. After identifying the members of the hacker group, the hunters exposed their identities to the hacker world and actually took out an advertisement in a local newspaper, further exposing the identities to the surrounding community and asking, “Isn’t it terrible that these young people are acting illegally and bringing disgrace to the community and on their families?” The team leader stated the community backlash was swift and quickly motivated the hackers, who happened to be young adults and youth, to stop their hacking activities and return to “selling illegal pornography.”

The example described above is not an isolated case. This approach and technique has been used for many years within the hacker community itself. Persons perceived by the community as having violated some hacker norm are often exposed by other hackers. The practice is so common that those persons (and groups) seeking vengeance even have a nickname (they are sometimes referred to as “blue hat” hackers) within the hacker community.<sup>480</sup> Criminal enterprise hackers also have been noted to expose rivals. It

is reasonable to speculate whether adapting the strategy of exposure as a modified element in counter-ISIS operations might produce similar modifications in behaviors, particularly for those sympathizers who may not yet fully embrace the tenants of the group. Terrorism expert Yannick Veilleux-Lepage, from University of St. Andrews, writes:

In order to frame its message, IS has developed a range of exceptionally professional and sophisticated communication and social media initiatives that are exceptionally easy to access and highly attractive to their audiences, including publishing eBooks and eMagazines and professionally edited videos produced by *al-Furqan and al-Hayat*.<sup>481</sup>

Veilleux-Lepage further writes that an amateur grade of sympathizers is also vital to ISIS messaging success, indicating:

This extensive reliance on unaffiliated sympathizers either re-tweeting or re-posting content produced and authorized by IS leadership has ‘no clear precedent’ and thus can be seen as a groundbreaking paradigm shift in the evolution of jihadism in cyberspace. This reliance on unaffiliated sympathizers was clearly exemplified on the day Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the establishment of the Caliphate; IS began circulating pictures of his speech before a video of the speech was uploaded several times on YouTube. The links to these YouTube videos were then uploaded on the widely popular file sharing website justpaste.it by agents for IS’ official media groups prior to being tweeted by IS to tens of thousands of sympathizers.<sup>482</sup>

ISIS propagandists can be described as taking two general forms: the more professional grade, often widely separated from the battlefield; and the more amateur, unaffiliated sympathizers, many of whom can be described as “jihobbyists”<sup>483</sup> or “eHadis,”<sup>484</sup> who help crowd source jihad, and are perhaps as motivated as the professional class of propagandists to never actively participate in actual combat. Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller, of British think-tank Demos, describe these sympathizers as being on “the edge of violence.”<sup>485</sup> There is, however, a third category of sympathizer, markedly rarer, but more potentially dangerous to USSOCOM operations: individuals who initially participate in crowd sourcing propaganda activities, but then move toward the battlefield.

The messaging success of ISIS can therefore be described as chain mail in which linkages are interwoven, and thus widely dispersed, so as to create a figurative propaganda garment to “cover the world.” In this model, the professionals link to the amateurs, some of whom will seek mortal combat (and others who will not). Like chain mail, intact linkages are essential for the garment to be able to protect the heart and other vital organs. Breaking even a few links, particularly in vital areas, renders the chain mail not only useless, but a heavy burden that can be leveraged by the opponent seeking to slow the movement of his adversary.

A recent RAND report highlights the complex structure of these networks and also offers insight on the “who” and “how” of influencing them. Specifically, their analysis of approximately 23 million tweets that reference ISIS, identifies four major groups: ISIS supporters; Shia; Syrian mujahideen; and Sunni networks. Excluding the Sunni groups, which are fragmented largely along nationalistic lines, the authors suggest a moderate level of cohesiveness among the other three networks. To that end, counter-messaging directed towards ISIS supporters and opponents should take into account location and level of support. For example, the Syrian mujahideen network may serve as a conduit of sorts between ISIS supporters and moderate Sunnis. This point highlights the necessity of targeting messaging at the appropriate tribal, community, or national level as appropriate.<sup>486</sup>

USSOCOM, other combatant commands, and the intelligence community are, of course, currently exploiting social media connectivity to target ISIS and other affiliated groups. Given the sensitivity, the specific mechanisms are well beyond the scope of this document. Suffice it to say human intelligence, open-source intelligence, signals intelligence, imagery intelligence, and other types of intelligence are being used in some combination to create an intelligence picture of the “who” and “where.” The open press has gained a very cursory knowledge that this type of social media exploitation is taking place.<sup>487</sup> What is not being transmitted is the sources and methods, and the tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) being utilized, which must always be guarded.

A question emerges as to whether the TTP could remain guarded, while the intelligence garnered is used purposely for a different effect. If so, should the United States stop targeting the message altogether and instead focus entirely on the messenger? To some degree, this outing of identities has already begun amidst the freedom and the chaos of the internet. Andrew

Emett, writing for The Free Thought Project.com, described the exposure of ISIS identities:

Disillusioned with ISIS leadership, a whistleblower within the terrorist organization just released the identities of 22,000 jihadis hailing from at least 51 countries, including the U.S., U.K., and Canada. Stolen from Islamic State's [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria] internal security, the detrimental memory stick contains tens of thousands of documents, including a personal 23-question form each jihadi was required to fill out before induction into ISIS.<sup>488</sup>

Furthermore, another cyber vigilante group, called Cyber of Emotion and based in Saudi Arabia, allegedly hacked into email accounts of purported ISIS sympathizers, discovered their identities, many of whom they claim were women in relationships with jihadis, and looked for sensitive information. They then transmitted the sensitive information to Saudi security forces and reported accounts to Twitter for banning. "We targeted them specifically to try to stop their dangerous and deviant ideas from spreading in Saudi society."<sup>489</sup>

The previous example touches upon an important point that is receiving an increasing amount of attention in relation to our understanding of ISIS and its activities, namely the role(s) of women within the organization. Broad estimates suggest that approximately one in five Western recruits to ISIS are female. Media accounts tend to suggest women's participation is related to gender roles: they are enamored by male fighters (and accounts of their activities) and/or they are seeking husbands. Regardless, these depictions suggest

*Broad estimates suggest that approximately one in five Western recruits to ISIS are female.*

the roles of females are dictated by—and should be viewed in terms of traditional gender roles within Islam.<sup>490</sup> However, a growing number of scholars contend otherwise, stating these oversimplified depictions reflect more the gendered lens through which ISIS is viewed rather than

the roles themselves. It is an exaggeration to view female participation as personal (as opposed to political or religious), or to characterize them as "cheerleaders" for or victims (of males).<sup>491</sup> To the contrary, females typically join and become involved with ISIS for the same and varied reasons as do males, including a sense of identity and belonging, agreement with ideological tenets (e.g. establishing a caliphate), or as a reaction to perceived or real

discrimination—individual or collective—against Muslims. In addition to being valuable recruiters and conduits for dissemination of information, there are multiple examples where females take on an active role in violent acts.<sup>492</sup>



## Chapter 7. Conclusion

The literature on terrorism, insurgency and IW indicates that terrorists and insurgent groups that utilize violence for political ends usually base their movement on popular support, legitimacy, ideology, and local grievances. This is true of terrorist groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS who highlight Muslim grievances to justify their use of violence.<sup>493</sup> They claim to represent those marginalized groups and fight for their redemption and dignity. While a majority of Muslims reject these apocalyptic self-styled groups that claim to represent Muslims, there is a target audience that has proved susceptible. The key is to find out who this minority audience is, that supports this kind of violence, and work towards limiting their influence by connecting the silent, ‘usually neutral’ majority with the minority audience who visibly opposes these terror groups and their activities especially in areas where they have established presence.<sup>494</sup> Usually, this requires security guarantees from CT forces as people living in conflict areas are motivated by ‘self-preservation’ and suffer from high stress.<sup>495</sup> The primary goal of terrorist groups like ISIS is to undermine the legitimacy of the state, promote disorder and establish control over the target population in the short term towards meeting their long-term goals of establishing their own state structure. As seen from the chapters in this monograph, the strategy adopted by ISIS is to coerce, persuade, and intimidate the population to support its political causes. This ISIS operationalized, by running parallel governments, visibly broadcasting its presence, and threatening the population via its armed presence with dire consequences if support is not enlisted.<sup>496</sup> ISIS framed its movement within well-known apocalyptic Islamic literature of end-times, and portrayed the idea of their caliphate as offering the space where the Messiah or Mahdi will emerge. To this end, ISIS captured strategically inconsequential towns like Dabiq in Syria, as it finds mention in apocalyptic literature as the site where “Western crusaders” will be defeated.<sup>497</sup>

The rapid takeover of territory by ISIS in Iraq and Syria in 2014, its secretive organizational structure, and its goal of establishing a sharia-based state, or caliphate, marked the entry of a new type of territorially oriented terror group. Heavily influenced by AQI, led by al-Zarqawi, in terms of tactics and visible demonstrations of violence, including the beheading of foreigners

on video, ISIS went on to develop a propaganda strategy that streamed its videos and speeches to millions.<sup>498</sup> Unlike al-Qaeda, who had a long-term goal of targeting the West, ISIS aimed to take on more near-term enemy—

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namely, the Shia community and those who did not adhere to its interpretation of Islam. Also unlike al-Qaeda who broadcasted its audio and video tapes through networks like Aljazeera,<sup>499</sup> ISIS produced its own films, short documentaries, and audio narratives of what an Islamic state should look like, and then utilized social media to disseminate its videos and imagery. ISIS has utilized its online presence to reach out to Muslims across the world, especially from the West, by calling them a ‘chosen few from distant lands’<sup>500</sup> and cleverly

using British or Canadian Muslims to describe life in the caliphate as normal, prosperous, and a religious paradise. In one of the videos, a Canadian ISIS member describes how he enjoyed a normal life in Canada, earning good money and enjoying a good life, when the call of the caliphate, a religious obligation for all true Muslims, landed on his doorstep (i.e., laptop). Using Canadian or British English, such videos are aimed at susceptible Muslim youth in the West. And the impact has been felt with several youths, mainly in the 16 to 35 age group, traveling to the caliphate.

ISIS locates its discourse in a heady mix of sectarianism, apocalyptic narrative, longing for a caliph, and an attention to spreading their propaganda beyond Arab-speaking populations. ISIS magazines, videos, and audio discourses are available in several languages, and are easily accessible. The designs are slick and cater to the millennials’ sense of internet savviness. Significantly, ISIS leadership, as discussed in earlier chapters, are mostly drawn from Iraq, the seat of Sunni grievance, to include Saddam Hussein-era military officers at the level of colonel and above. What this implies is that ISIS brings to the table years of military training, survival tactics, local networks, and the experience that these officers gathered while sustaining Hussein’s authoritarian regime. The fusion of intoxicating religiosity, heavily based on the life and sayings of the Prophet, social media campaigns, Qur’anic singing, ancestry, ethnicity, and military culture all fused together to deliver to ISIS the quick success it enjoyed when it rolled into Syria and

Iraq. The civil war in Syria only helped matters for ISIS, especially when coupled with the Assad regime's own focus on ensuring that it does not become another victim of regime change in the Middle East, as was the fate of Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya.<sup>501</sup>

Moreover, while al-Qaeda has established subgroups for different territories, it has not established a caliphate. ISIS established a caliphate and then released a map in which it identified territories, including some examined in this monograph like Bangladesh, Burma, India and Indonesia, to which it aimed to expand its presence and domain. Towards this end, ISIS utilized the idea of Khorasan, historically viewed as the golden age of Islam. This belief is based on Hadith in Sunan at-Tirmidhi 2269 that black banners will rise from Khorasan and then spread to the Mecca and Jerusalem, cities with deep seated religious significance in Islam. ISIS envisions an end-times battle in India (Ghazwa-e-Hind) between true believers and unbelievers. With ISIS losing territory in Iraq and Syria, there are concerns that ISIS will aim to expand to Afghanistan, and then through its Khorasan province into South and Southeast Asia. This is based on its "remaining and expanding" goals. ISIS aims to spread physically to Bangladesh, Burma, India and Indonesia.

ISIS aims to spread physically to Bangladesh, Burma, India, and Indonesia. Table 2 on page 112 summarizes the ISIS perception of opportunities in these four countries, along with each country's strengths and threats vulnerabilities. In recent years, violent attacks have been registered against secular bloggers, and foreigners with ISIS claiming responsibility specifically for those targeting foreigners. ISIS locates Bangladesh in its 'The Revival of Jihad in Bengal' manifesto and warns that it will use Bangladesh as a base for further expansion into Burma and India. The rising intolerance in the country to include the growing political chasm between the AL and the BNP over the targeting of JI leaders in a criminal investigation by the AL government, creates a vicious atmosphere of division and hate. Organizations like the ICS whose goal is to establish sharia law in Bangladesh, have been accused of instigating violence against secular bloggers. The matter gets further complicated by the fact that while the Bangladesh constitution includes secularism as one of its principles, its state religion is Islam. Both ISIS and AQIS aims to spread to Bangladesh, taking advantage of divisions within the country. The Bangladesh government denies the existence of ISIS within its territory blaming local terror groups for the growing violence. The weak state presence in rural areas of Bangladesh could provide some ground for ISIS

expansion but that can be deterred with effective intelligence and shoring up state presence. Areas of vulnerability could be Rohingya refugee camps, as well as the Cox Bazar area, infamous for its illegal small arms factories and as a conduit for the flow of illegal small arms, given its proximity to the Golden Triangle.<sup>502</sup> The U.S. and Bangladesh issued a joint statement in 2016 that identified the shared threat posed by ISIS and al-Qaeda and Bangladesh is a participant in the U.S. Counterterrorism Partnership Fund. USSOCOM and Bangladesh could work within that framework to share intelligence. Of special relevance is ISIS usage of apps like Viber, We-chat and Whatsapp to share its ideology and recruit volunteers for its cause. Bangladesh lacks a skilled regulatory system to monitor these activities efficiently. International partnerships can augment this capacity.

Burma has witnessed growing violence against its Rohingya community from its majority Buddhist population. Rohingya Muslims are denied citizenship despite living in Burma for generations, and most have fled the violence in recent years to seek refuge in neighboring Bangladesh. In the new democratic structure, the NLD has failed to offer representation to this community thereby rendering them voiceless. Muslims accuse the NLD of compromising with democratic principles, while anti-Muslim sentiments are raked up by Buddhist monks like Asin Wirathu. Both ISIS and al-Qaeda noted the Rohingya crisis, and pledged to fight on their behalf. The Rohingya Muslims have armed groups like HaY and the RSO claiming to fight on

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*Of special relevance is ISIS usage of apps like Viber, We-chat and Whatsapp to share its ideology and recruit volunteers for its cause.*

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their behalf. HaY has attacked the Tatmadaw and the BGP bringing about a massive counterinsurgency operation that has been accused of massive human rights violation. There are concerns that Rohingya Muslims could fall for ISIS propaganda and recruitment. This view is strongly countered by Wakar Uddin, director-general of Arakan Rohingya Union, who believes that linking the Rohingya crisis to ISIS is a deliberate attempt to distract international attention from the humanitarian crisis underway. In addition, Rohingya Muslims follow a moderate Sunni Islam, and practice Sufism. Puritanically extreme Islam of ISIS holds little appeal. Furthermore, the areas that ISIS aims to spread in Burma harbor strong ethnic armed insurgencies like the Was and Kachins. This will pose a severe threat to ISIS presence.

ISIS's aims to occupy territory in India via Pakistan and Afghanistan, by first establishing bases in these two countries and then adopting a strategy of attrition vis-à-vis India. It aims to collaborate with Indian terror groups like IM, AuT, and JKH. ISIS cites the 2002 Gujarat riots, the issue of Kashmir and treatment of Muslims in a Hindu majority India as causes for its expansion into India. ISIS mocks Indian Muslims for peacefully co-existing with Hindus (*kuffar*) and tries to instigate them to carry out terror attacks in India. In a May 2016 video, ISIS pledged to fight for Muslims in Assam, Kashmir, and Gujarat. ISIS mocked Indian Muslim clerics for standing up to their extreme tactics and designated them infidels. In March 2017, ISIS launched its first terror strike in India injuring 10 passengers by setting off a bomb on a train. The chapter on India specifies four factors that have limited ISIS appeal in India; its representative political structure; its social fabric of diversity that infuses together several cultures and creates societal harmony; the issuance of fatwas (legal decrees) by influential Indian Muslim *Ulema* against ISIS; and a web of CT agencies and 'Special Forces' that have worked to limit terrorism. Two key areas of vulnerability in India are regions that have a weak state presence as well as the rising tide of Hindu nationalism.<sup>503</sup>

Indonesia views its fight against ISIS in ideological terms, a battle between moderate and radical Islam, with its version of moderate Sunni Islam offering a fitting counter to ISIS. Despite this, ISIS still attempts to spread its presence in Indonesia. ISIS Indonesian leaders like Bachrumsyah Mennor Usman, Bahrn Naim, and Gigih Dewa operated from Iraq and Syria. Bachrumsyah was appointed by al-Baghdadi as leader of ISIS Southeast Asia battalion called the *Katibah Nusantara*. However, major Indonesian terror groups like *Ji* views ISIS as a rival. Moreover, Indonesian civil society organizations like NU and Brotherhood Forum of Indonesian Council of Religious Scholars has rejected ISIS ideology and instead preaches an Islam based on pluralism, tolerance, and socioeconomic development. Indonesian political institutions are based on democratic values and Muslims are well represented. Former Presidents like Abdurrahman Wahid played an instrumental role in accepting the country's diversity as part of Pancasila principles of peaceful co-existence.<sup>504</sup> Special CT units like Detachment 88 have succeeded in thwarting ISIS inspired plots. The unit has benefited from assistance from the U.S. and Australia towards training and intelligence sharing. It is critical to persistently counter ISIS messaging in the cyber domain, given the fact that it is perhaps the most advanced cyber-battlefield messaging adversary.

With battlefield losses, especially in its declared caliphate, ISIS is losing its power of invincibility that attracted thousands of foreign recruits. This message should be sent to the target audience by U.S. regional partners in the Middle East through online platforms in regional languages. It is perhaps important to know who are hard-core ISIS fighters and who are fair-weather

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patriots in order to intelligibly decide direct operational action against the hard-core. Hacking into accounts of ISIS sympathizers can reveal effective intelligence. Moreover, the role of women in ISIS, mostly depicted as based on gender roles within Islam, and affected by personal feelings, is highly exaggerated. More often than not, women join ISIS for the same reasons men do; agreement with

its ideological doctrines, a shared sense of identity, and in reaction to perceived or real discrimination against fellow Muslims. Through the cyber domain, ISIS now transcends borders like al-Qaeda.

Eradicating the ISIS threat requires a five-pronged strategy. First, it requires a ground-based military effort that eradicates its bases, thereby activating an 'area denial' strategy. ISIS's core appeals are its territory and the caliphate; deny those and they lose much of their appeal. This area denial strategy will have to consist of simultaneous military response and enhanced civilian governance: establishing a state structure where Muslims, both Sunni and Shia, believe they are adequately represented. This aspect is particularly significant given ISIS loss of territory to an international coalition in recent months. Terror groups, that are weakened, usually tend to lie low, merge into the civilian population and then regroup at a later date. Consequently, it is pertinent for USSOCOM along with partner nations to help improve partner capacity in governance.

Second, it is critical to publicly question ISIS's interpretation of Islam by utilizing the Qur'an. Indonesian and Indian Muslim elders have effectively activated such a strategy and it has had a social impact especially in countering ISIS social media strategy. This could form part of 'countering the messenger' strategy as part of USSOCOM-partner nations collaboration, either bilaterally or through a multilateral forum.

Third, broadcast the internal divisions within ISIS, and expose the poor conditions when it governed. Exposing the so-called paradise for what it

is, is critical. In this, ISIS defectors play a critical role, as their stories have greater credibility than a campaign run by USSOCOM.

Fourth, connect the CT efforts against ISIS into a single grid. The battle to defeat ISIS took so long due to the mixed purposes and fractious relationships of those who were fighting against it. For example, the Turkish military and the Kurdish peshmerga did not get along, the Russians attacked Syrian rebel forces that fought ISIS, and there were divisions and much misinformation in rebel camps. It's a complex battlefield and greater effort will definitely help future CT efforts. CT cooperation—including joint training efforts, intelligence assessments, and strategic planning, especially with those countries identified by ISIS as future areas of operation—will help thwart any capability ISIS develops in establishing terror networks.

A goal of USSOCOM is to analyze and successfully respond to ISIS attempts to spread terror across borders. Within the domain of CT and COIN, understanding the manner in which ISIS creates networks in countries outside of its caliphate in Iraq and Syria offers useful insights not only to break those networks, but to also create awareness in the U.S. of similar ISIS efforts. ISIS utilizes the same strategy in the West, where it aims to motivate Western citizens to join the caliphate and then carry out attacks in its name in their countries of origin, as it does in India. The more ISIS loses territory in Iraq and Syria, the more likely it is that the group will quickly draw upon this sort of non-state strategy. It is therefore critical to be prepared for that metamorphosis is bound to happen sooner than later. ↑

Table 2. ISIS Perception of Opportunity, Country's Strengths, and Country's Threat Vulnerability			
Ctry	ISIS Perception of Opportunity	Country's Strengths	Country's Threat Vulnerability
Bangladesh	<p>HIGH</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Divisive Politics</li> <li>2. Growing Intolerance and Societal Radicalization</li> <li>3. Local Presence of Affiliated Terror Groups</li> </ol>	<p>MODERATE TO HIGH</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Democratic Institutions</li> <li>2. Strong Military Presence</li> <li>3. Trained Special Forces</li> <li>4. Free Media</li> <li>5. Presence of Moderate Islam</li> </ol>	<p>HIGH</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Multiple Terror Attacks</li> <li>2. Weak State Presence in Rural Areas</li> <li>3. Porous International Borders</li> <li>4. Flow of Illegal Small Arms</li> <li>5. Weak Internet Regulation</li> <li>6. Unification of Radical Groups</li> <li>7. Reach of ISIS Social Media</li> </ol>
Burma	<p>LOW</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Rohingya Muslim Crisis</li> <li>2. Increase in Armed Rohingya Groups</li> <li>3. Muslims not Represented in Democratic Institutions</li> <li>4. Highlighted in ISIS Online Discourses</li> </ol>	<p>MODERATE</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Rohingya Muslims not Attracted to ISIS</li> <li>2. Moderate Islam</li> <li>3. Strong Military</li> <li>4. Multiple Ethnic NSAGs Present in Areas ISIS Aims to Establish Presence</li> <li>5. Buddhist Majority</li> </ol>	<p>MODERATE TO HIGH</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Porous International Borders</li> <li>2. Conduit of Illegal Small Arms</li> <li>3. Weak State Presence in Rohingya Areas</li> <li>4. Lack of Institutions to Salvage Rohingya Muslim Grievance</li> <li>5. Reach of ISIS Social Media</li> </ol>
India	<p>HIGH</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Part of Wilayat Khorasan, Included in Apocalyptic Islamic Literature</li> <li>2. India Central to ISIS Perception of the Rise of a <i>Mahdi</i> During End-times, as Referred in Ghazwa-e-Hind</li> <li>3. 1992 Babri Masjid Demolition, the 2002 Gujarat Riots and Kashmir</li> <li>4. Affiliated Local Groups</li> </ol>	<p>HIGH</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Secularism as Mentioned in Preamble to Indian Constitution</li> <li>2. No State Religion</li> <li>3. Strong Armed Forces</li> <li>4. Growing Economic Strength</li> <li>5. Indian Muslim Organizations Reject ISIS</li> <li>6. Inclusive Local Democratic Structures</li> </ol>	<p>MODERATE</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Rise in Hindu Nationalism</li> <li>2. Weak State Presence in Rural Areas</li> <li>3. Porous International Borders</li> <li>4. Lack of Networked Infrastructure in Conflict Affected Areas</li> <li>5. Reach of ISIS Social Media</li> </ol>
Indonesia	<p>HIGH</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Establishment of ISIS Southeast Asia Battalion</li> <li>2. Affiliated Local Terror Groups</li> <li>3. Ability to Infiltrate Society</li> <li>4. Presence of Radical Sunni Islam</li> </ol>	<p>HIGH</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Inclusive Democratic Institutions</li> <li>2. Strong Armed Forces Including Special Forces</li> <li>3. Rejection of ISIS by Powerful Civil Society Organizations</li> <li>4. Strong Presence of Counter-Religious Narratives</li> </ol>	<p>MODERATE</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Ability to Orchestrate Terror Attacks</li> <li>2. Porous International Borders</li> <li>3. Presence of Radical Schools like <i>Al-Mukhim</i></li> <li>4. Allegiance Given by Influential Former JI Spiritual Leader, Abu Bakr Bashir</li> <li>5. Reach of ISIS Social Media</li> </ol>

## Acronym List

<b>AAMSC</b>	All-Arakanese Monks' Solidarity Conference
<b>ABT</b>	Ansarullah Bangla Team
<b>AL</b>	Awami League
<b>AQI</b>	al-Qaeda in Iraq
<b>AQIS</b>	al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent
<b>ARSA</b>	Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army
<b>AuT</b>	Ansar ut-Tawhid fi Bilad al-Hind
<b>BGP</b>	Border Guard Police
<b>BNP</b>	Bangladesh Nationalist Party
<b>CIA</b>	Central Intelligence Agency
<b>COIN</b>	counterinsurgency
<b>CT</b>	counterterrorism
<b>CVE</b>	combating violent extremism
<b>FARC</b>	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia
<b>FID</b>	foreign internal defense
<b>FPI</b>	Islamic Defenders Front [Front Pembala Islam]
<b>HaY</b>	Harakah al-Yaqin
<b>Hel</b>	Hefazat e-Islam
<b>HuJI</b>	Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami
<b>ICG</b>	International Crisis Group
<b>ICS</b>	Islami Chhatra Shibir
<b>IM</b>	Indian Mujahideen

<b>IS</b>	Islamic State
<b>ISIS</b>	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
<b>IW</b>	irregular warfare
<b>JAD</b>	Jamaah Ansharut Daulah
<b>Jl</b>	Jemaah Islamiyah
<b>JeM</b>	Jaish-e-Muhammad
<b>JKH</b>	Junud al Khalifa-e-Hind
<b>JKLF</b>	Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front
<b>JMB</b>	Jamaat ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh
<b>JTJ</b>	Jama'at al-Tawhid wa'al-Jihad
<b>LeT</b>	Lashkar-e-Taiba
<b>MHA</b>	Ministry of Home Affairs
<b>MISO</b>	military information support operations
<b>MNLF</b>	Moro National Liberation Front
<b>NIA</b>	National Investigation Agency
<b>NLD</b>	National League for Democracy
<b>NSAG</b>	non-state armed group
<b>NSG</b>	National Security Guard
<b>NU</b>	Nahdlatul Ulama
<b>PSYOP</b>	psychological operations
<b>RNDP</b>	Rakhine Nationalities Development Party
<b>RSO</b>	Rohingya Solidarity Organization
<b>SOF</b>	Special Operations Forces
<b>SP</b>	Sinai Province

<b>TTP</b>	tactics, techniques, and procedures
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>USSOCOM</b>	United States Special Operations Command
<b>UWSA</b>	United Wa State Army



## Endnotes

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