

Gurmeet Kanwal*

Rise of the Islamic State: Dangerous New Threat to Stability in Strife-torn West Asia

New Threat in West Asia

In the second week of November 2015, militants from Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi's self-proclaimed Islamic Caliphate – also called ISIS, ISIL and Daesh – struck multiple targets in Beirut, Paris and Mali. Earlier, on 31 October, ISIS claimed to have brought down an Airbus aircraft of the Russian airliner Metrojet soon after it took off from the Sinai resort of Sharm el-Sheikh on a flight to St. Petersburg.

Upping the ante in West Asia by several notches, President Francois Hollande of France virtually declared war on the ISIS and sent a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier to the region. In order to better coordinate US air strikes, President Barack Obama approved the deployment of 50 Special Forces personnel to fight the Islamic State. And, President Vladimir Putin of Russia joined in with air strikes. One Russian fighter aircraft was reportedly shot down by Turkey for violating its air space.

During the Cold War, the state of turmoil in West Asia used to be an accurate barometer of the world's political climate. At that time, the two superpowers jockeyed for power and influence in the oil rich region through their proxies but were not directly involved in any of the conflicts in the region. That situation has now changed and both Russia and the United States are now direct participants in the crisis in Iraq and Syria.

In the current manifestation of instability in the perpetually strife-torn West Asian region, the charge is led by the virulently radical Sunni militants of the Islamic Caliphate proclaimed by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The ISIS is engaged

* The author is Adjunct Fellow, Wadhvani Chair in US-India Policy Studies, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Washington, D.C. Also, former Director, Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), New Delhi.

in a vicious fight with the armed forces of Iraq and Syria and the Peshmerga – forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) from the Kurdish belt along the Iraq-Turkey border. It has captured territory in Iraq and Syria and demonstrated its ability to defend its gains. In the civil war that has been raging in Syria since 2012, almost 2,50,000 people have been killed and thousands of refugees have begun migrating to Europe; many hundreds have perished in the attempt.

Further west, Palestinian attackers backed by the Fatah and Hamas have been clashing with the Israeli security forces on a daily basis, with casualties on both sides. The growing violence, attributed to Palestinian anger with Israel's continuing occupation, has sparked fears of a new intifada on multiple fronts. Disagreements over prayers at the Temple Mount and the Al-Aqsa mosque in Israel-controlled East Jerusalem are aggravating the tensions. Elsewhere, not too far away in Africa, Egypt, Libya and Tunisia are still mired in the aftermath of the tribulations of the Arab Spring and armed conflict continues in South Sudan that became independent in 2011. On the Arabian Peninsula, Saudi Arabia is engaged in fighting the Houthis on its border with Yemen and making heavy weather of it.

The security environment in the perpetually strife-torn West Asian region has deteriorated so rapidly in recent years that the region has become an area of extreme concern for the international community. The advent of the Islamic Caliphate, driven by ultra hard-line Sunni fighters, poses a new challenge to peace and stability in a region that supplies much of the world's oil and gas. The real long-term danger arises from the inability of Iraq and Syria to eliminate the threat posed to their sovereignty by the ISIS. Syria's long-term ally Iran – and its proxy the Hezbollah, the Shia militia based in Lebanon – have come to Syria's aid and deployed their forces to fight the ISIS, but the militia has shown remarkable resilience.

Triumphant March of the Islamic State

The newly proclaimed Islamic Caliphate headed by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi – believed by some to have been killed in an air strike, is also called ISIS (the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria); ISIL (the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham or Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant); and, Daesh. Its leadership's ideology is so primitive and barbaric that Osama bin Laden is reported to have declined to have anything to do with them when they had approached him. The video-taped beheading of three innocent hostages, released on social media, exemplified its brutality.

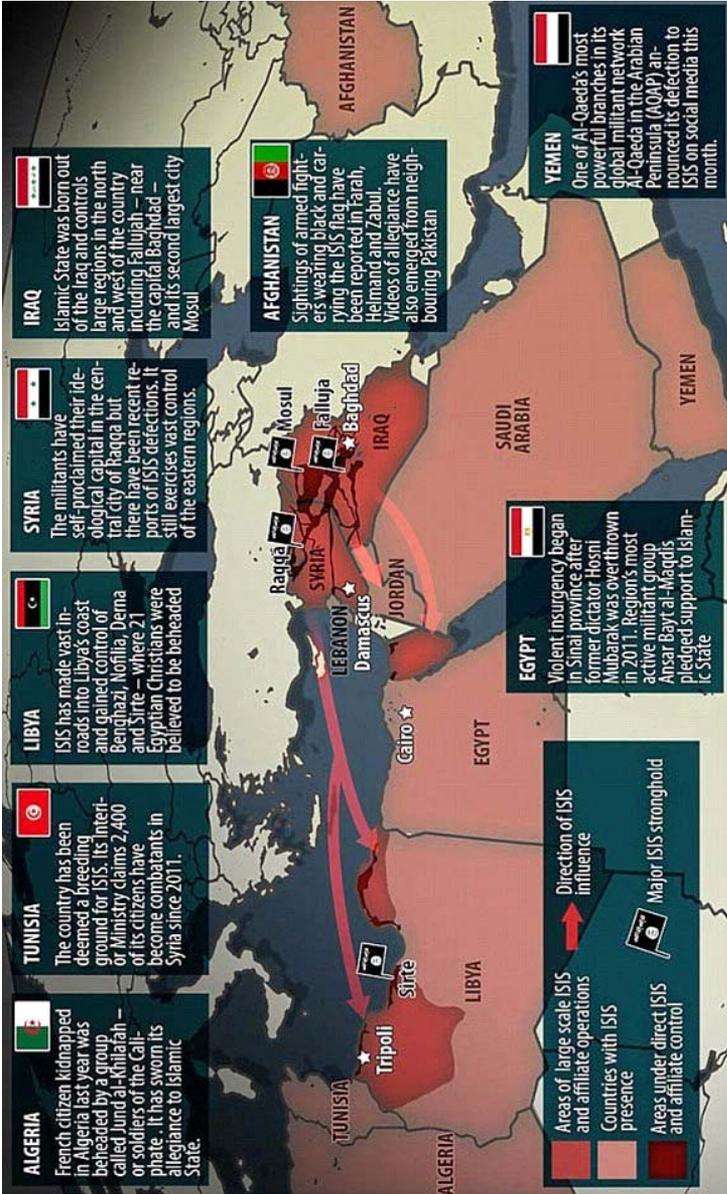
Though it was quite obviously planned over a decade, the actual rise of the Caliphate began just over a year ago. After capturing Faluja in January and

Mosul in June 2014, ISIS fighters made rapid progress in advancing along the Euphrates River in Anbar Province of Iraq and have succeeded in holding on to their gains. In Syria, the militia of the Islamic State has consolidated its hold over the eastern provinces bordering Anbar Province of Iraq. President Bashar al-Assad's forces have managed to retain control over Damascus and the area up to the Mediterranean Sea. The 'Nusra Front', the Syrian affiliate of the Al Qaeda, controls most of northwest Syria and is gradually gaining ground. Syrian rebels known as the 'Southern Front' are continuing to fight President Assad's forces while avoiding clashes with the Nusra Front. In the north, the 'Free Syrian Army' has a tenuous foothold over a small patch of territory.

On 17 May 2015, the Iraqi city of Ramadi, the capital of Anbar Province, had fallen to the militia of the so-called Islamic Caliphate. Soon after this, on 21 May, the fighters captured the ancient Syrian city of Palmyra. Syria had lost Bosra in March and Yarmouk in April. And, as if to prove that their tentacles ran wide, on a single day in the last week of June 2015, terrorists owing allegiance to the Islamic State struck targets across three continents in France, Kuwait and Tunisia and left many people dead and wounded. With the capture of Ramadi (re-captured by the Iraqis in October 2015), Palmyra, Bosra and Yarmouk, the vicious fighters have extended the area under their control to about 10 million people and almost 95,000 sq. km of mainly Sunni territory, straddling the border between Iraq and Syria. They have also captured about half the gas and oil fields and have begun to offer some rudimentary administrative services.

The triumphant march of the virulently radical Sunni militants of the Islamic State has been halted, but virtually on the gates of Baghdad. The militia of the Islamic State, numbering between 20,000 and 30,000, now control large parts of the border between Syria and Iraq and have seized key border crossings on the Syrian border with Jordan. The Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) have succeeded in preventing the loss of additional territory, with help from the Iranian-supported Shia militia fighters called Hashid al-Shabi or Popular Mobilisation Units. In fact, together they recaptured the Baiji oil refinery on 24 October 2015. Simultaneous attacks are now being planned so as to divide and stretch the ISIS militia. Unless Sunni tribes can also be persuaded to join the fight, the fightback will remain weak.

Air strikes against the ISIS militia are being launched by Australia, Britain, Canada, France and the United States and five Arab countries (Bahrain, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates). Tunisia may soon join this coalition. Only the Peshmerga, Kurdish freedom fighters, have held their own. If left unchecked, the threat posed by the ISIS has the potential to spread rapidly across the Sunni Muslim world, including to the Indian sub-continent.



Courtesy: www.dailymail.co.uk

Areas Under ISIS Control or Influence

Volatile Region

The ongoing civil war in Iraq and Syria and the sudden flare up between Israel and the Palestinian Hamas in June-July 2014 are only the latest manifestation of conflict in West Asia that is driven by unstable states and deep-rooted sectarian divisions in society and the deep rooted interest of the West in oil. Although most 'balance of power' rivalries and superpower proxy wars have now ended, West Asia is still the hunting ground of superpowers and remains the most unstable region in the world.

Stretching from the edge of the Indian Sub-continent in the east to the Horn of Africa in the west, West Asia has often been called the 'Arc of Crisis'. The popular image of West Asian instability is that of a chaotic world, crumbling everywhere and always falling apart, an area governed by abrupt, sweeping changes and unpredictable developments. The West Asian states are locked in internecine quarrels due to religious, ethnic or historical rivalries and inherited colonial legacies such as boundary disputes. West Asia is a house divided, an Islamic world divided against itself despite the strongest possible motive for unity – a shared hostility towards Zionism.

The long-standing Arab and Palestinian opposition to the existence of Israel as a nation-state and senseless terrorism directed against the Jews, have led Israel to pursue a belligerent foreign and national security policy that is not conducive to peace in the region. Israel's annexation of the whole of the West Bank and Gaza, as well as East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights in Syria in the 1980s was unacceptable to the Arabs and the Muslim world.

Israel's excursion deep into Lebanon in 1982, all the way up to Beirut, created more problems than it solved. The Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), whose evacuation from Lebanon was secured by Israel at great cost, was soon back in strength. Palestinian and Hizbollah terrorism has abated somewhat after Israel's pull-out from the occupied territories in Gaza and South Lebanon, but sporadic violence continues; and, Israel's on-off rocket, missile and air attacks against Hamas militiamen remain in the headlines.

The continuing deadlock over Palestine remains a vexatious issue. Though the world accepts the Palestinians' right to an autonomous state, the issue is still to be finally resolved. Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's historic handshake with Chairman Yasser Arafat in September 1993 appeared to have had the potential to change the course of history but has so far led only to a temporary reprieve. The installation of a Hamas-tolerant Palestinian government and the return to power of Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel have further exacerbated the situation.

Lebanon was more strife-riven and unstable during the last two decades of the twentieth century than at any other time in its bloody and chequered history.

The Israel-Lebanon conflict of July 2006, sparked by the capture of Israeli soldiers by the Hizbollah, was a new watershed in a volatile conflict zone. Without the presence of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) on the Israel-Lebanon border, daily incidents of terrorism and violence would have continued unabated.

The occupation of Iraq by the US-led coalition forces in 2003, ostensibly to capture and destroy Saddam Hussein's WMDs – which were never found – further destabilised the region, shattered Iraq's economy and drove up oil prices. The vacuum left behind in Iraq by the withdrawal of the US-led coalition forces in December 2011, led to the rise of Sunni militancy, which, in its early days, was supported by Saudi Arabia. The participation of a large number of Saudi nationals in the September 11 attacks in the US and Saudi support for Sunni uprisings, have gradually cooled the cosy relationship between the US and Saudi Arabia.

The Arab Spring protests in Syria, which began in March 2011, degenerated into a full-fledged civil war by July 2012. It has been reported that “President Bashar al-Assad's Alawite-controlled military has used chemical weapons, mass starvation, indiscriminate bombing of civilian areas and denial of drinking water to kill hundreds of thousands of mostly Sunni Syrians.” The aim of the opposing forces is to overthrow Assad's Ba'ath government that has been in power since 1963. The main motives of the broad range of opposition groups, from Islamists to left-wing secular parties and youth activists, are to end repression and undertake political reform. Iran and Russia have traditionally supported the Assad government.

The European Union has estimated that almost 2,000 European citizens have joined the Jihadist groups fighting government forces. European governments are concerned that these battle-hardened combatants would pose a long-term security threat when they return. The crisis in Syria has led to the exodus of a large number of refugees and could soon assume ominous regional dimensions. It has already spilled over into Iraq in the form of a Shia-Sunni conflict.

Weak Counter-strategy

The arc of crisis is spreading gradually beyond West Asia and the ISIS militia is slowly but surely gaining ground. The Houthis of Yemen are fighting Saudi Arabian forces. ISIS fighters have been active in Algeria, Lebanon, Libya, Mali and Tunisia in recent months and Boko Haram, the militant Islamist group in Nigeria, has pledged allegiance to ISIS. ISIS has proved itself adept at fighting simultaneously on multiple fronts. Not surprisingly, the ISIS has carried the war into cyberspace and is deftly exploiting the Internet as an effective

propaganda tool to spread its message. It is using Facebook and bulletin boards to influence the minds of Muslim youth and gain recruits. The international community has not yet found an answer to this potent threat.

Significant help is being provided to the government of Iraq by the US and its allies. And, in a move that might be a game changer in the long run, the Peshmerga, forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) that had captured oil-rich Kirkuk, regarded as the Kurd capital, have joined the fight against the ISIS in the Syrian border town of Kobani. Known as tough fighters, they are expected to drive the ISIS militia away from the areas claimed by the Kurds. So far, 5,00,000 to one million refugees have been added to the large number of displaced persons already struggling to stay alive in the steaming hot cauldron that is West Asia today.

After vacillating for several months and admitting that he had no strategy, President Obama decided to join the fight by launching air strikes against ISIS forces. In early-November 2014, President Obama approved the deployment of 1,500 additional troops to take the strength of ground troops to 3,500. Though they were initially given only a training and advisory role and confined to their bases, that policy is gradually changing. The US is likely to soon begin embedding its troops with the ISF in small numbers for specialised tasks such as forward air controllers and the coordination of intelligence.

The ISIS militia has managed to hold on to its gains despite the air strikes being launched by the United States and its allies and the help provided to the government of Iraq. The ISIS has absorbed the air strikes well, much like the Vietnamese did half a century ago. A major lesson that has emerged from the recent conflicts, particularly those in Afghanistan and Iraq, is that a guerrilla force that operates from safe havens among the rural population cannot be defeated from the air alone. The US, its allies and Russia are unlikely to prevail over the ISIS militia without committing troops on the ground to fight a long-drawn counter-insurgency war against them. The US is trying to prime the Iraqi forces to fight ISIS. This is a half-way option.

The ISIS militia faces no serious opposition on the ground except from the Kurdish Peshmerga. The Kurds are unlikely to be willing to fight beyond the land for which they seek autonomy. If the air strikes have achieved anything, these have been successful in buying time for the disorganised Iraqi forces to regroup to offer a more cohesive fight. The US has been arming the Syrian opposition led by the Free Syrian Army for several years to fight President Assad. It now hopes the Syrian opposition will join the fight against ISIS.

The US President is aware that American troops are not welcome in Iraq and even less so in Syria, besides the lack of support at home for involvement in yet another unwinnable war in West Asia. His administration is banking on

hope and the passage of time to prevail over the ISIS militia. The President is hopeful that in due course the air campaign will begin to become effective, the Iraqi forces will become a more cohesive fighting force, and the Kurds will exert meaningful pressure on the ISIS militia from the north. The President forgets that hope is not a strategy.

At the very least, Special Forces must be employed to prevent the ISIS militia from consolidating its gains. Another pragmatic move would be to support the rise of a militarily strong Kurdistan as a bulwark against further ISIS expansion, but Turkey will have to be convinced that such a course of action is necessary. Jordan needs to be given the support necessary to thwart the growth of ISIS to the west.

Meanwhile, in a surprise move, Putin's Russia joined the fight on 30 September 2015, with the twin aims of defeating the ISIS and destroying anti-Assad forces. However, so far, the air strikes launched by the Russian air force have been directed mainly against the forces opposed to President Assad of Syria – the same militias that are being armed and supported by the US. Russian ground troops are also expected to join the fight soon. The Russians have also descended on Baghdad to establish a military intelligence coordination cell jointly with Iran, Iraq and Syria – a move that has not been appreciated by the Americans.

In a rare show of unity after the Paris attacks, the United Nations Security Council passed a unanimous resolution stating that “The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant constitutes a global and unprecedented threat to international peace and security,” and called upon all member states to join the fight against the ISIS.

Diplomatic moves have been initiated to coordinate operations and work together for peace and stability. The US and Russia agree that the objective of their interventions should be to end the civil war in Syria through a political deal and that both Iraq and Syria should remain united countries. They also agree that the ISIS extremists must be completely eliminated. Iran has agreed to join the negotiations to resolve the conflict in Syria. However, while the political objectives are similar, the methods being used to achieve them are different and are designed to extend the influence of each of the protagonists in the region.

Implications for South Asia

Al-Baghdadi has openly proclaimed the intention of ISIS to expand eastwards to establish the Islamic state of Khorasan that will include Afghanistan, the Central Asian Republics, eastern Iran and Pakistan. The final battle, Ghazwa-e-Hind – a term from Islamic mythology – will be fought to

extend the caliphate to India. An ISIS branch has already been established in the Indian sub-continent. It is led by Muhsin al-Fadhli (he died in July 2015) and is based somewhere in Pakistan. Some factions of the TTP have declared their allegiance to al-Baghdadi. Afghanistan's new National Security Adviser, Mohammad Hanif Atmar, has said that the presence of Daesh or the ISIS is growing and that the group poses a threat to Afghan security. And, some ISIS flags have been seen sporadically in Srinagar.

Instability and superpower rivalry in West Asia does not augur well for India's national security and economic interests. Combined with the escalation of force levels in the Indian Ocean, the heightened tensions in West Asia may ultimately lead to a spill-over of the conflict to adjacent areas. India now imports almost 75 per cent of the oil required to fuel its growing economy and most of it comes from the Gulf. The long-drawn conflicts of the last two decades of the 20th century had forced India to buy oil at far greater cost from distant markets, with no assurance of guaranteed supplies. The 1991 oil shock had almost completely wrecked India's foreign exchange reserves. The situation could again become critical. Oil prices had shot up to 115 dollars per barrel in June 2014, soon after the Caliphate was proclaimed, but have since stabilised around 50-60 dollars per barrel.

Since the early 1970s, Indian companies have been winning a large number of contracts to execute turnkey projects in West Asia. The conflict in the region has virtually sealed the prospects of any new contracts. Also, payments for the ongoing projects are not being made on schedule, leading to unabsorbable losses for the Indian firms involved, and a dwindling foreign exchange income from the region.

India also has a large diaspora in West Asia, which includes female workers. A large number of Indian workers continue to be employed in West Asia and their security is a major concern for the government. Some Indian nurses had been taken hostage by ISIS fighters, but were released unharmed. All of these together constitute important national interests, but cannot be classified as 'vital' interests. By definition, vital national interests must be defended by employing military force if necessary.

US officials have been dropping broad hints to the effect that India should join the US and its allies in fighting ISIS as it poses a long-term threat to India as well. India had been invited to send an infantry division to fight alongside the US-led coalition in Iraq in 2003. The Vajpayee government had wisely declined to get involved at that time as it was not a vital interest.

It must also be noted that India has the world's third largest Muslim population. Indian Muslims have remained detached from the ultra-radical ISIS and its aims and objectives, except for a handful of misguided youth who are

reported to have signed up to fight. This could change if India sends its armed forces to join the US-led coalition to fight the ISIS militia.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi proposed at the G-20 summit at Antalya a week after the Paris attacks that the war against terrorism must isolate and contain the sponsors and supporters of terrorism. He clearly implied that India is willing to join the international coalition against the ISIS and other non-state actors as a partner. Besides contributing to the global war against terrorism, India's participation would help to isolate the Pakistan army and the ISI – the foremost state sponsors of terrorism.

However, direct Indian military intervention against the ISIS militia would depend on the manner in which the situation unfolds over the next one year. It could become necessary if ISIS is able to extend the area controlled by it to the Persian Gulf as that would affect the supply oil and gas from the Persian Gulf to India – clearly a vital national interest. However, India should cooperate closely with the international community by way of sharing information and intelligence and providing logistics support like port facilities if asked for. India should also provide full diplomatic support and work with the United Nations for a consensual approach in the fight against the ISIS.

Concluding Observations

Hisham Melhem, the Washington bureau chief of Al-Arabiya, has written: “The Arab world today is more violent, unstable, fragmented and driven by extremism – the extremism of the rulers and those in opposition – than at any time since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire a century ago.” The Arab world must collectively accept responsibility for the failures that have led to the sorry state prevailing at present.

The conflicts in Gaza, Iraq, Israel, Libya and Syria – a number of seemingly unrelated crises – have the potential to blend together to unleash a regional nightmare with much wider repercussions. Ideally, the regional states must forge a common strategy to resolve their conflicts. Only then can there be peace and stability in the long term. It is for the Arabs to find the military resources necessary to seek and destroy ISIS fighters on the ground. However, due to deep-rooted suspicions and centuries-old animosities, the countries of West Asia are unlikely to be able to do so and they will need bipartisan help and support.

A concerted international effort is needed to first contain and then comprehensively defeat the ISIS and stabilise Iraq and Syria, failing which the consequences will be disastrous not only for the region, but also for most of the rest of Asia and Europe. Helping the regional players to gradually eliminate the root causes of instability will not be an easy challenge for the international community to address. As an emerging power sharing a littoral with the region, India has an important role to play in acting as a catalyst for West Asian stability.