

Regionalization of Political Violence: Arab Levant and Rise of Islamic State

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Abstract

Globalization has exacerbated the threat of transnational terrorism in the Middle Eastern region which is already marked with several fault lines including sectarian divide, authoritarianism, poor governance and religious extremism. Not only have the regional structural and territorial dimension of the region elevated the influence of the violent non-state actors, they have also led to the emergence of a new non-state actor, Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which has adopted entirely different practices from other non-state actors including al-Qaeda. Structural dimension consisting of sectarian divide and fractured state structure has helped ISIS to compartmentalize the society in Iraq and Levant and the territorial dimension has provided it an opportunity in attracting foreign fighters and gaining wealth on an unprecedented level. This paper explains the sudden rise of the ISIS as a formidable force in Middle East. In the context of globalization of the non-state actors and violence in which it explains the rise of Islamists and it argues that the political, economic and social situation of the ISIS-controlled territories in Iraq and Syria was already fertile to be exploited. Had it not been ISIS, there could have been someone else who could have exploited the situation, filled the power vacuum and enjoyed all of the robust indicators exploited by the Islamist organization. This study is based on an explanatory approach and relies on secondary data, particularly newspaper and electronic media sources.

Keywords: Political Violence; Arab Levant; Islamic State.

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Introduction

The post-new world order era¹ has witnessed an unprecedented rise of transnational actors including ethno-national and religiously motivated individuals and groups.² The non-state actors,³ especially Islamists, have gained more influence and status than ever before, particularly in the Middle Eastern region which is marked with sectarian divide, failed democracies, an unfulfilled promise of Arab Spring and disgruntled youth in the given framework of the fractured state structures.

The Middle Eastern political landscape cannot only be dealt in the given Shia-Sunni split and security imperatives along the geopolitical compulsions. Rather, the rise of Islamic State in the Levant⁴ and Iraq has brought the phenomenon of the non-state actors back on top of the analytical inquiry with new dimensions including wealth, social engrossment, and global ideological appeal. Not only has the rise of the ISIS changed territorial map of the region, it has also surprised the world with introduction of new war techniques resulting in global attraction and challenging the traditional insurgency practices followed by the local and transnational militants.

ISIS, primarily a Sunni militant organization, has emerged after the US withdrawal from Iraq. Operating under the banner of al-Qaeda till 2013, the groups kept relatively a low profile and focused more on attacking the foreign troops than the locals. However, after the US' withdrawal in 2011, the group started launching attacks against Nouri Al Maliki-led [Shia dominated] government and staged several bomb attacks, kidnapping, beheading, looting and killings of the people, mainly Shi'ite.⁵ By 2014, it emerged as an independent organization in both Iraq and Syria after having several differences with al-Qaeda which initially proved fatal for ISIS as the al-Qaeda affiliate Al-Nusra and its allies drove ISIS out of northwestern Syria.⁶

Unlike other non-state actors, ISIS has apparently operated with a different strategy ranging from generation of wealth to operational planning. Traditionally, unconventional forces rely on 'hit and run strategy' and continuously change their positions.⁷ But ISIS has claimed caliphate on its territory, removed international borders and fought as a military force. In addition, unlike al-Qaeda, it has welcomed the foreign fighters from across the globe. It has avoided expanding the scope of targets to the west; rather, its strategy is yet region-specific. As stated above that the Middle Eastern region is marked with several fault lines, the Islamists have exploited these structural opportunities including poor governance,

sectarian divide, globalization of non-state actors and violence and interpretation of Islamic thought in a specific context.

Inequalities of Globalization and the Rise of Non-State Actors

The structural intricacies of the international political system are beyond comprehension. It ostensibly preludes nation-states, international organizations, and many other semi-state actors having incorporated the phenomenon of private armies. However, with the passage of time, the realists' dominated state-centric notion of the world is diminishing, because states are not the only actor in the world politics.⁸ Since the end of the WWII, the numbers and influence of the non-state actors have also been increasing.

The inception of the globalization in early 1990s has ushered the rise of criminal transnational actors like al-Qaeda, Hezbollah and many other militant groups.⁹ Very recently, the rise of the ISIS also owes its genesis to the perturbed security environment of the region (especially Iraq), ideological bifurcations, regional rivalries and the inability of the state to address and mitigate this milieu. The fragile security apparatus, weak state security structure and broken dream of Arab Spring have made the situation even more volatile. These factors have given a boost to an organization like ISIS to emerge out of nothing.

In addition to the rise of the non-state actors, globalization has also enhanced asymmetric threats due to increased gaps in technological and military developments. Weaker actors across the world use the option of terrorism to compensate their conventional disadvantages. As a result, international terrorism has emerged as one of the most vivid asymmetric perils. Non state actors may get access to Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) and can use them. Although globalization and the resulting technological advancement have diminished the inter-state wars, they have empowered multiple violent non-state actors which can amass wealth to support their protracted wars and implementation of the radical ideologies. Now they have easy access to finance and open-source technologies.¹⁰

The violent non-state actors are operating worldwide. Notwithstanding the technological advancement of the great powers and their satellite-based surveillance systems, the violent non-state actors have become independent and developed techniques to survive and operate successfully. For instance, Hezbollah possesses strategic missile forces and has shown the ability to disrupt and manipulate the Israeli satellite-based

intelligence system in 2006.¹¹ In addition to this, territorial and structural dimensions are important to keep in mind while analyzing the violent non-state actors as a common threat to the world.

Structural dimension encompasses diverse components, operating under the military wing like hybrid, merging guerilla forces with terrorist cells.¹² It may operate with the political wing like front organizations, social communities, logistic networks and media blocs or propaganda wing. The examples of such structures may consist of several layers ranging from classical terrorism and insurgency to legal, political activities which are large parts of violent non-state actors such as Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia and Kurdish Workers Party in Turkey.

The abovementioned entities have physical significance and center of gravity to address. These networks are usually united by ideology, shared interests, common goals and a common vision of the enemy, but operate separately from each other, which is more challenging to deal with. The second dimension of violent non-state actors is territorial and it is related to non-state actors' trend of taking over non-governed territories across the world. These territories might be failed or failing states, lawless areas, or gray zones. The violent non-state actors use those territories for their interest and convert them into safe havens, operational hubs and zones for illegal criminal activities.¹³

The rise of ISIS can also be pondered in these two parameters. The emergence of a powerful non-state actor is not a new phenomenon in the region, but its overwhelming influence (still growing) is sweeping through national to mainstream international media. ISIS' violent demonstration of brutalities has appealed the militants across the globe. The attractiveness of the ISIS is thus pulling in more and more youth into its sphere of influence. The conservative middle class of the Muslim countries is also playing an anchoring role. In combination, the structural and territorial factors are increasing ISIS' strength as an organization independent of al-Qaeda.

The New Bully on the Block: Islamic State and Divergence from al-Qaeda

ISIS has been successful in identifying itself different from al-Qaeda despite being a former off-shoot.¹⁴ Though the US is targeting ISIS as an associated force of al-Qaeda,¹⁵ yet the US lawmakers and experts agree that both organizations are different

in several aspects, especially after the announcement of caliphate.¹⁶ ISIS and al-Qaeda's ideological position is almost same, but the ground realities suggest that ISIS' structure, strategy, sources of funding and operational methodology is different from that of al-Qaeda.¹⁷

For instance, unlike al-Qaeda, ISIS has been fighting as a conventional military force since its ascent in the mid of 2014. It has employed conventional tactics and is using assault rifles, tanks and grenades like other traditional military forces.¹⁸ It has captured and strengthened its control on the territory and declared caliphate on it. It has not defined its goals with a long-term approach and sought no high-profile U.S. or UK-based targets. Secondly, ISIS seems more brutal than al-Qaeda. Clint Watts argues, "It attracts disaffected young people that want to kill other people."¹⁹ Its extreme form of violence and brutality against the declared enemies has attracted international attention and more followers.²⁰ Al-Qaeda and ISIS appear desperate to attract youth, but the latter seems successful in this regard particularly because of recruitment boom in Syria. The latter has approximately 20,000 to 30, 000 fighters²¹ while the former's Arab exclusiveness, traditional recruitment method, defections, and enmity of the US have kept the former's numbers low. In addition, ISIS has proved skillful in using modern social media. Its sympathizers and affiliates appear well-organized in posting material and using web apps such as Twitter, Whatsapp, and Kick while al-Qaeda relies less on social media probably due to the threat of being hunted.²²

ISIS' skillful media campaign has attracted a large swath of foreign fighters. Unlike al-Qaeda, ISIS does not appear to be an elite organization but rather like an army or a party that runs a country. It does not seem in need to plan spectacular attacks on the West to maintain its relevance because its focus of the battle is home-front.²³ Several of the ISIS' strategies have proved attractive for the new recruits. For instance, al-Qaeda initiated the struggle with an aim of establishing a caliphate in late 1980s, yet it was nowhere in achieving this goal till the start of this year. On the other hand, ISIS already has what the former aspires for, for instance, an Islamic State.

ISIS' online recruitment strategy urges the followers to reach in the IS to live according to Sharia because imposition of Islamic laws, idea of going back to Islamic style of governance and an internationalist attraction are the factors what the followers need. It is probably one of the most important reasons that their numbers are still increasing despite their governments' robust

actions to stop their traveling.²⁴ In addition to this, ISIS seems to have a financial brain and it generates more revenue from internal sources unlike al-Qaeda which relies on donations that make it suspicious to the younger generation of the militants.

Structural Amicability to the Rise of ISIS

Before the rise of the ISIS, dealing with the Islamists was more a foreign policy problem or that of 'interests abroad' for the West. However, this organization has made militancy a two-sided (domestic and foreign) problem for them. Though it is difficult to give precise numbers of Westerners fighting alongside ISIS, Soufan Group claims that there are 12,000 fighters from 81 countries. Among the foreigners, at least 2500 are Westerners mainly from the US, Canada, Belgium, Denmark, France, Britain and Germany. ISIS leadership has assigned the task of administration of their gains to the majority of the Westerners.²⁵ This is why the trained professional are not playing role on fronts. As far as the local ISIS' fighters are concerned, they are either ideologically motivated or belong to the deprived chunk of the society and former regime in Iraq who perceive themselves the victims of overwhelming influence of Shi'ite-dominated power hierarchy.

The Sunni-Shi'ite Divide and the Aggravation of Failed Rules

Iraq, the hometown of ISIS, is a Muslim majority country with deep sectarian divide. Sunni-Shi'ite divide is not new in the context of Iraqi politics. Although it has also been explicit during Saddam's regime, the post-invasion chaos has exacerbated it. The popular uprising in Syria against the Assad regime has further exacerbated it. Overall, the contemporary manifestation of Sunni-Shi'ite divide in Iraq is a result of a tussle of resources, prestige, political power and status. The sectarian tool, in this way, has proved beneficial for ISIS in recruitment.

During Saddam's reign, thousands of the Iraqi Shi'ite community members were exiled. The Iraqi troops slaughtered tens of thousands in Shi'ite majority areas. In 2003, when the US tried to form a national government after the invasion and toppling the regime, it also could not succeed in ending this divide. Iraq's transition to democracy brought the majority [Shi'ites] into power which had the support of the principle intervener. Notwithstanding the American endeavors to implement liberal democracy representing all major stakeholders, Iraq's identity was inevitably transformed from Sunni-Iraq to Shi'ite-Iraq over the last decade.

Iraq witnessed the de-Baathification process during the transition phase which comprised the ejection of the Sunni elite nurtured by Saddam Hussein.²⁶ One of the Iraqi analysts commented on this situation,

“There was an underlying trend of revenge, nobody was talking about it but many of things were taking place as they wanted to make sure that what happened to them in past would not happen again.”²⁷

For this purpose, the Shi'ite elites replaced their Sunni predecessors and tried to ensure their authority in every stratum ranging from higher education to key ministries. The latter resented this change, felt sidelined, boycotted the political process and sought supporting the Sunni militants as their revenge.

Sunni militant groups, notably former al-Qaeda in Iraq (former AQI and now ISIS), started executing terror attacks on both of foreign troops and Shi'ite community. The group's leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi who considered the Shi'ite as heretics attacked the community's most sacred places in the country such as Karbala, Samarra and Najaf and killed numerous Shi'ite clerics, soldiers, politicians, militiamen and civilians. However, this divide was not a one-way trek; rather the government-supported Shi'ite militias also attacked several mosques, killed various Sunni leaders and murdered Imams.

In 2006, for instance, when the AQI attacked al-Askri Mosque, the Shi'ite community members burnt around 90 Sunni-Mosques and murdered 10 Imams. Around 100 dead bodies were also found in the following days.²⁸ Till the rise of the ISIS, the members of both communities continued to attack each other and their holy sites. However, in the meantime, Sunni members of Parliament and key position holders were also ejected from the process. Former Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki almost bulldozed every institution in the country and both Sunni and Kurds started considering him the Shi'ite Prime Minister of Iraq guarding only the Iraqi Shi'ite.²⁹ As a result, Sunni politicians who entered belatedly in the post-invasion politics were disillusioned and they left the process.

The recent takeover of the Sunni-majority areas in Iraq is not merely a result of ISIS' strength but of the Sunni community's feelings of disenfranchisement and disenchantment. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has recently stated that the exclusion of the Sunni and other groups from the Iraqi politics has played a substantial role in the rise of ISIS.³⁰ The exclusion of

minority groups created a power vacuum in the areas where former Baathists were active. This development resulted in the demolition of Shi'ite power sphere in the northern part of the country. ISIS, as a result, exploited this opportunity and overran almost all the northern towns with the support of Baathists and other Sunni groups.³¹

A Crisis Group report shows that the scope of armed struggle between pro-ISIS and pro-government groups has been widening with the passage of time. Various actors are fighting against the government alongside the ISIS including the tribal militants, former members of armed forces and Baathists.³² ISIS has been demolishing and attacking Shi'ite's holy sites and shrines in its territory since it first called its captured territory as Islamic State. Response from pro-government factions is also violent. For instance, the ISIS attacked al-Askari Mosque in July 2014 and killed six people³³ while the Shi'ite militiamen opened fire on a Sunni mosque in August 2014 and killed around sixty-eight people.³⁴

According to the Amnesty International reports, the Iraqi government forces have also massacred detainees in revenge which shows that there is a clear divide between Sunni and Shi'ite groups in the country.³⁵ ISIS' fierce policy towards Shi'ite-supportive Sunnis, attacks on the Shi'ite, marginalization of the moderate Sunnis and Shi'ite militiamen's attack on the Sunnis have exacerbated the sectarian conflict which has pushed even moderate Sunni groups towards ISIS. The existing grouping exacerbated by the contemporary regional situation may cause a long and destructive civil war in Iraq which is likely to affect the region.

Volatile Regional Political Landscape

The Middle Eastern political, social and economic dynamics have also provided an opportunity to ISIS to emerge from nothing. For instance, Debasish Mitra of Times of Oman argues that "Arab Spring has gone horribly wrong and has spawned dangerous counter-revolutionary forces including ISIS."³⁶ The ground realities of Iraq and Syria show that a substantial chunk of the population wanted change in these two states, though the reasons and narratives were different. This study has yet taken Iraq more into consideration than Syria and has not discussed uprising against the regime, rise of counter-regime forces and how the Islamists especially ISIS hijacked the whole movement?

Iraq and Syria had several commonalities before the fall of the Saddam regime including Baath parties, ruling minorities,

dictatorship, and sectarian politics. In Iraq, where the sectarian division was already a major threat, the US' deliberate emancipation of the Shi'ite community members made the Sunnis suspicious and resentful towards the Shi'ite-controlled regime. They were fearful of an onslaught by the Shi'ite-controlled security forces and militias which had driven them out of the capital amid the sectarian conflict of 2006. As a cable of the US embassy in Baghdad reveals,

*"More than half of all Baghdad neighborhoods now contain a clear Shia majority. Sunni community members have largely lived to outlying areas or have been concentrated into small enclaves surrounded by Shia neighborhoods."*³⁷

In addition to the pro-Shi'ite bias, many Iraqis were disillusioned with the government's performance and prevalent corruption. Many notables distanced themselves from the political process and corruption and nepotism remained prevalent. In fact, corruption proved to be the major reason of inefficacy of Iraq's one million security forces against ISIS. Patrick Cockburn of The Independent argues that

*"ISIS is the harvest of corruption. People pay money to become part of the army so that they can get a salary. In this way, they are not soldiers but investors."*³⁸

A combination of multiple courses such as corruption, sectarian divide, occupation of the US, weak government and flawed political process made the Iraqi government merely representative of the majority and made the minority groups, especially Sunnis, convened to pursue 'another course of action' for their own emancipation.

Notwithstanding the similarities, there were certain differences between Iraq and Syria. For instance, the Syrian Baath party did not embrace the course of the war especially after Bashar al-Assad's rise to power in 2000. Since his early days in the office, his outlook remained inward. He tried to intensify the economic liberalization reforms of early 1990s and privatized the state-owned land farms.³⁹ However, this policy affected the northeastern agriculture-based economy and weakened the farmers' ability to face the challenges posed by a four years-long drought (2006-2010). The UN noted that about three million Syrians were pushed into 'extreme poverty' and fled to shanty towns in the cities.⁴⁰ Inflation continued to grow and affected the middle-class. Above

all, cheap imports from the neighboring countries particularly Turkey forced small businesses out of competition and led to further unemployment and poverty. Those migrants later on proved to be an important source of revolt against the regime in 2011. For instance, Derra and Homs based migrants actively participated in the demonstrations and the first victims of the state violence were also migrants. In 2011, International Crisis Group reported:

“The Syrian authorities claim they are fighting a foreign-sponsored, Islamist conspiracy, when for the most part they have been waging war against their original social constituency. When it first came to power, the Assad regime embodied the neglected countryside, its peasants, and exploited underclass. Today’s ruling elite has forgotten its roots.”⁴¹

Cockburn also supports the argument that the “Syrian uprising is not only a product of the sectarian divide but also stems from deep political and economic divisions.”⁴² Like other societies in the region, the Syrian populace also stood up and organized peaceful demonstrations for a secular, law-bounded and democratic government, though Islamist prominence was more visible than Tunisia. After the start of the armed clashes between protesters and security forces, the Syrians initially supported the rebel groups. As the war continued, once-welcomed groups of Free Syrian Army (a loose alliance of rebel groups) became notorious for their lootings and burglary and the locals, in reaction, welcomed the jihadists for restoring law and order.

Structural dimension including regional political landscape and sectarian divide explains different aspects of the rise of ISIS. However, the territorial dimension can also explain the questions of pivotal importance. For instance, how ISIS has amassed so much wealth? How has it gathered such a strong and formidable army in months? And how is it successful despite the animosity from within the country and abroad?

Geographical Proximity and Emergence of ISIS as the Wealthiest Organization

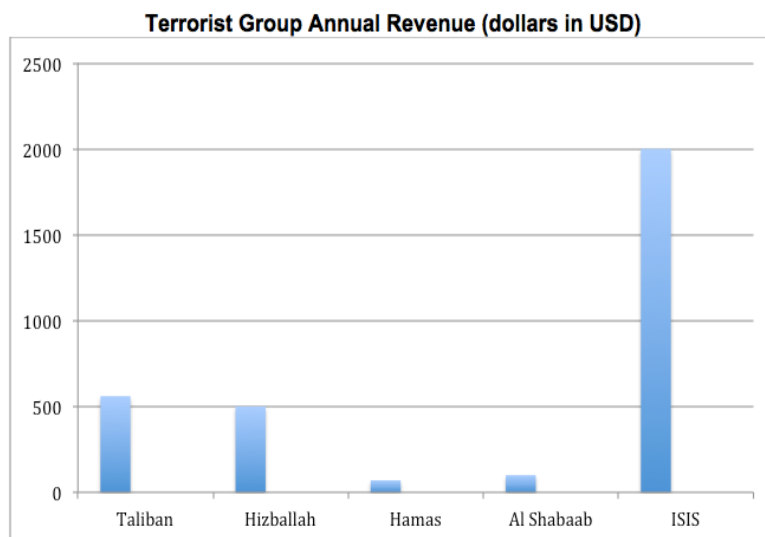
ISIS is believed to be the wealthiest militant group in the world. It relies on all kind of sources of income including enslavement and selling of the captured women, extortion, plundering, taxation, kidnapping, donations and selling crude oil in the black market. These sources have kept the flow of money intact and placed ISIS among the richest militant non-state actors. In Mosul alone, ISIS is believed to have seized \$429 million after seizing the Iraq’s second

largest city in July 2014. According to rough estimates, it earns around \$8 million a month.⁴³

The US State Department's Annual Country Reports on Terrorism has shown a comparative analysis on five major militant groups which pose a threat to the U.S. interests at home and abroad. These groups are

- Al Shabaab
- Hizballah
- Hamas
- Taliban in Afghanistan
- ISIS

According to the State Department's list, ISIS' estimated financial standing now beats other four major Islamist organizations.⁴⁴ This chart shows a comparison of all five organizations' wealth.⁴⁵



The US government sources have claimed that the ISIS earns around \$1 million a day only through exporting crude oil. The ransoms which it receives from abductions, particularly of Westerners, and taxes from the cities under its control have enriched the organization. U.S. Treasury under Secretary David Cohen who is also in charge of financial intelligence and terrorism has recently stated that the Islamic State is “the world's wealthiest terror group, generating tens of millions of dollars a month from black market oil sales, ransoms and extortion.”⁴⁶ He further states:

*The group has amassed the wealth at an unprecedented pace from different sources than most terror groups. This poses a particular problem to the United States and its allies: We have no silver bullet, no secret weapon to empty ISIL's coffers overnight. This will be a sustained fight, and we are in the early stages.*⁴⁷

Abduction of foreigners and locals in Syria and Iraq is an important source of income of ISIS. Not only it abducts people for economic benefits, but these kidnappings also serve its political objectives. In this regard, journalists and employees of the corporate sector are lucrative targets. They are nonresistant and can secure a handsome amount from their organizations for ISIS. For instance, abduction of one of the senior producers of News Pat Milton brought \$70,000.⁴⁸ It is also believed that some of the European governments have paid large amounts to ISIS for a safe return of their abducted citizens, though those governments deny the reports.⁴⁹ In addition to abductions, other criminal activities such as enslavement of women and forceful taxation system are also beneficial tools for ISIS.

Unlike other militant organizations, ISIS has developed a well-organized taxation system. The group has formalized internal financing method through implementation of an Islamic form of taxation and export of oil. It generates revenue from almost every economic activity conducted within its [controlled] territory. For instance, any cargo whether consisting of imports or exports cannot leave the checkpoint without paying tax. As one of the civilians living in the IS has told Newsweek in an interview, "The tax system was well-organized. They took money from small merchants, petrol station owners, generator owners, small factories, big companies, even pharmacists and doctors."⁵⁰ This state of affairs suggests that it would be a hard task for the West and its allies to cut group's access to funding which is further strengthening its control in the neighborhood and enhancing its ability to pose threat for a longer period.

Comparative analysis on al-Qaeda and ISIS shows that the latter does not secure most of its funds from rich donors or sponsor states.⁵¹ Rather, it has independent sources of revenue including oil. Luay al-Khatteeb argues,

*"After the recent losses of territory, ISIS has the capacity to produce around 25,000 barrels a day, which can generate about \$1.2 million even if it sells them at a discount price of \$25-\$60 a barrel."*⁵²

It also relies on mobile refineries due to its inability in operating complex structures of oil refineries. The extracted oil is exported through the middlemen while using the routes used by smugglers during the Saddam regime. However, all of the smugglers do not belong to Iraq; rather, some of them are Turks who can ensure safe passage of oil to Turkey. Involvement of other regional and the battling leaders such as Bashar Al Assad in the oil business is also an open secret. Assad has also made “arrangement to purchase oil from ISIS-controlled Syrian oil fields.”⁵³

ISIS has also received handsome amounts from the government and private sources in the rich monarchies of Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. Sunni [private] donor networks have been operating in the region even long before ISIS’ ascent to power in Iraq. Although Saudi Arabia, under the pressure of the US and the international community, has passed a legislation criminalizing financial support of militant organizations such as Al-Nusra and ISIS, a majority of the donors still remain unchecked in Kuwait and Qatar.⁵⁴ As Lori Plotkin Boghardt argues that Kuwait and Qatar continue to stick out as two trouble spots when it comes to counterterrorist financing enforcement, rich families in both countries including a parliamentarian family of Mohammed Hayef al-Mutairi in Kuwait have raised funds for ISIS. Shafi al-Ajmi and Hajjaj al-Ajmi, members of influential al-Ajmi family, along with four notable Syrian Sunni clerics have remained active fundraisers since the start of the Syrian civil war. Therefore, it may not seem surprising that Kuwait is the largest source of humanitarian aid in Syria since the onset of the civil war.⁵⁵

Crackdown on ISIS donors seems complicated for their respective governments. In addition to hard cash, the donors have continued to flow food and other necessities in guise of humanitarian aid. This ‘fake humanitarian’ aid flows from Qatar to Kuwait which plays a key role in delivering it into Iraq and Syria, according to the Brookings Institution. Along with aid and transfer of goods, ISIS has not faced any serious obstacle in the movement across the region. Its potential members are able to join their fellow Islamist through Turkey from across the world. To ensure their safe arrival, ISIS needs to control the border towns.

Geography: An Exacerbating Factor

The ISIS members have been successful in reaching the battlefields in Iraq and Syria notwithstanding the border control mechanism of U.S. allies, Syria, and the Western states. In this regard, the former has struggled to secure the key routes and

important towns near Turkey-Syria border to ensure safe entry of the recruits. For instance, a large number of militants have recently moved towards the Turkish border in their looted armored vehicles to overcome the resistance and secure control of borders which might be redrawn in the future to expand the ISIS' territorial control.

Once the entry into a border town is sure, ISIS sends its envoys to negotiate access in order to gain the support of the population. For instance, during its raid on the Syrian opposition-controlled town of Marea close to the Turkish border, ISIS sent its envoys to negotiate access, though the civilians denied it. One of the Syrian rebels commented on this situation as,

*"They could storm in like the Mongols, if they wanted to. But they're trying to be nice. We have dealt with them before. There is no reconciling with them. We will have to fight."*⁵⁶

Securing the border towns is an important goal on ISIS' priority list. Therefore, continuous war has been witnessed in the conflict zone.

The Syrian opposition has fought a costly war with ISIS in the border towns in the early 2014. This battle has cost 2500 lives only in January to the former which is committed to toppling the Assad regime. Since the end of the six-week-long battle, ISIS' flow in the area has been slowed. And probably it was the main reason for ISIS' offensive on Kobane.⁵⁷ Along with launching assaults on Kobane, it continued struggle to strengthen its control of Syria-Iraq border towns and launched successful offensives including al-Qaim on 21 June and al-Waleed on June 23, 2014.⁵⁸

Losing control of the border towns means end of ISIS' independence, because the flow of the foreign fighters from the Turkish areas is likely to be slowed. Thus, it appears necessary for the Islamists to control the check-points and make it easier for those who want to join them to cross a 130-mile strip of the frontier which has been used by the majority of foreign fighters including British and Europeans. An Iraqi expert on ISIS Dr. Hisham al-Hashimi argues that the

*"Turkish border is the only way to smuggle oil, weapons and foreign fighters into Iraq and Syria. If this border is closed, it is likely to close three things: funding, link to Europe and entrance of foreign fighters. If these plans are destroyed, they would aim for another gate to Lebanon."*⁵⁹

Turkey has proved to be an important link to the world for ISIS. Although the US and the European governments have been urging Turkey to step up in order to stop militants from crossing into Syria through its territory since the rise of the Islamists, the Turkish officials have done a little to act in this regard. Turkey probably found weakened Kurds and Assad more cost-effective than bringing ISIS to halt. Some intelligence agencies reported that the Turkish police were more willing to stop ISIS than the national intelligence agency. Therefore, they claim that Turkey facilitated the militant either through undeclared policy or neglect.⁶⁰

An Interpol-based report has further clarified the importance of border towns for ISIS. It claims that ISIS' foreign recruits are using holiday cruise ships to enter in less concentrated coastal towns. The Interpol officials have claimed that "ISIS recruits took cruises to reach Izmit from where they were later smuggled into Syria."⁶¹ However, after the Turkish government's decision to increase security and supporting the West against ISIS, undetected ports seems the only available option to the European Islamists.

In the case of overwhelming reliance on the Turkish route, ISIS appears constrained to keep the border towns under control in order to ensure safe passage of militants, import-export, and food supply. Fierce battle between the Peshmerga forces and ISIS for Kobane is a reflection of this requisite. Though Kobane assault has not proved successful enough, ISIS may launch another offensive on another town anytime in the near future.⁶² In addition to this, its growing presence in Lebanon especially Qalamoun through a network of routes shows that the Islamists have also kept alternative options open in case of complete failure on the Turkey-Syria border.⁶³

Conclusion

The prevailing structural and territorial dynamics have proved crucial for the rise of the ISIS. The Islamist organization has been successful in exploiting power vacuum in parts of Iraq and Syria, because near absence of the Iraqi forces in the Sunni-majority areas in Iraq and prevalent anarchy in the Syrian province of Raqqa have provided an opportunity to the organization to assert itself in this part of the region.

In addition to the regional scenario, the growing strength of violent non-state actors has also added to the strength of ISIS. Islamists have access to almost everything which is needed. For instance, they have amassed wealth and can buy weapons from

black markets. Easy traveling and territorial loopholes, in addition, make the arrival of the foreigners to the IS easy. Whether they come to find a sanctuary or to fight a holy war, they can get both in one place. In other words, rise of ISIS is beneficial for both ISIS and foreigners joining it from across the world.

ISIS' rise is more a result of the abovementioned dynamics than of its own struggle. For instance, other militant organizations such as Hamas and Hezbollah have a long history of struggle. In the case of ISIS, however, it seems that the contemporary developments in the region have made its rise unprecedented. Thus, the regional structural and territorial dynamics seem a bigger threat than ISIS.

Power vacuum, unsatisfactory governance, a higher level of unemployment, authoritative governments and sectarian divide exacerbated by Iran and Saudi Arabia make the Middle Eastern dynamics exclusive and dangerous. The abovementioned factors, in combination, may lead to insurrection, rise of non-state actors or a bloody and protracted civil war anytime in any state. As far as ISIS is concerned as a specific entity, its brutal activities, colonial style of ruling and emergence of a strong anti-ISIS block may weaken the organization in the near future. However, the regional dynamics may also lead to the emergence of another militant group, no matter similar or different from ISIS. What seems important in this regard is addressing the volatile regional dynamics rather than killing civilians and militants alike with aerial bombardment.

Notes & References

¹ This term has been used to refer to a dramatic change in the global political landscape. There are several interpretations of this idea. For instance, it is related with three different periods such as Woodrow Wilson's fourteen points after WWI, creation of post-WWII world order or the post-Cold War era. This study uses third interpretation.

² Jahangir Arasli, "States vs. Non-State Actors: Asymmetric conflict and challenges to military transformation", *Eurasia Review*, March 13, 2011, <http://www.eurasiareview.com/13032011-states-vs-non-state-actors-asymmetric-conflict-and-challenges-to-military-transformation>

³ An individual or organization that has had significant political influence, but is not the part of any particular country or state or any organized group with a basic structure of command operating outside state control that uses force to achieve its political or allegedly political objectives. The non-state actors include 'rebel groups' and governments of entities which are not recognized as states. Non state actors can be ranging from terrorists and criminal networks to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and multinational corporations (MNCs).

⁴ Levant is a cultural and geographic region comprising Cyprus, Jordan, Israel, Lebanon, and some parts of Turkey nowadays, though its definition has varied over time.

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