Dissecting ISIS after al-Baghdadi and an introduction to its proliferation in South Asia

On the night of 26-27 October 2019, the United States (US) Joint Special Operations Command's 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment-Delta (SFOD-D), commonly known as Delta Force, conducted a military operation in northern Syria, the Barisha raid, officially codenamed Operation Kayla Mueller, with the purposes of capturing or killing the then-leader and self-proclaimed *'caliph'* of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. As a result of the raid, al-Baghdadi killed himself together with two children by detonating a suicide vest. On 31 October, ISIS' media propaganda arm, the *Amaq News Agency*, confirmed al-Baghdadi's death and named Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi as his replacement as the leader of the terrorist group. Although the US leadership loudly celebrated the former ISIS' chief demise as the biggest blow to the ranks and the leadership of the jihadist outfit, experts remain circumspect and vigilant to what extent his death is as significant as it has been eulogized in the public eye. Considering the immediate response on behalf of the organization and prompt succession with a brand new commander, the current reality mostly invalidates the precipitate ovations of victory on behalf of the US forces, and reveals a truth, where al-Baghdadi was just a symbol of a bigger picture, as William McCants, a fellow at the Center for Middle East Policy and Director of the Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World at the Brookings Institution, summarizes it: *"…a cog in a machine, an expression of an impersonal institution or historical forces".*

Hence, as the infamous inscribed saying in history goes, *"The king is dead, long live the king!";* the demise of al-Baghdadi alone, simply does not dent the continuity and survival of the terrorist group.

Introduction

This paper will explore this notion, arguing that ISIS' organisational framework, consists of a hybrid de-centralized structure, similar to a network, where despite the division of administrative responsibilities and functions, every member of the chain is easily replaceable, consolidating the operational capacity of the group and ensuring its sustainability and resilience in the future. In addition to that, it will discuss how the group draws upon loosely affiliated individuals and entities, which carry out their activities independently in various territories, guaranteeing the proliferation of the ISIS ideology and increasing the group's *"popularity".* On the basis of that, this paper will further provide an understanding of the Jihadi-Salafist ideologies ISIS utilizes to flourish, and will demonstrate how the group is not only erroneously interpreting Quranic scriptures to justify its violent actions, rendering its doctrines of belief inherently un-Islamic, but also that ISIS' utilization of religion is largely superficial, opportunistic and strategic – manifested through various contradictions in the tenets they are adopting –, and predominantly designed to recruit disenfranchised young individuals in abundance, rather than truly placing an importance on the interpretation of the teachings and traditions written in the Quran. Having such generalized and obscure ideological dimensions provide for the terrorist outfit to attract a broader spectrum of individuals, since it allows to put forward a fit-all narrative.

In order to understand that, this paper will analyze ISIS' online and media apparatus, which has proven to be amongst the organisation's most powerful weapons. It will claim that ISIS' digital outreach strategy has not only breached transnational and territorial boundaries, turning its mission more into a dreamlike nebulous idea rather than a concrete movement, but has managed to glamorize its actions, generating an almost *"super star"* image, which attracts impressionable youngsters in search of status and acknowledgment. Therefore, this paper will argue that such well-designed propaganda, which seduces thousands of sympathizers across the globe, regardless of their geo-political and socio-economic contexts, is alarmingly dangerous, since as Stephen M. Walt, Professor of International Relations at Harvard University has argued, *"…its opponents can recapture the territory it once controlled, kill or capture most of its leaders and foot soldiers, … but as long as its ideas can capture the imagination and loyalty of new adherents, the movement will survive in some form"*. What is more, the group's cyber-terror strategy has eminently changed the course of the modern global fight against extremism, bringing counter-terrorism efforts to a whole new virtual level.

For all of the above reasons, this paper will explain the group's financing mechanisms and establish that considering the wide variety of revenue-generating resources it maintains, ISIS highly resembles organised crime networks, necessitating law enforcement agencies to adopt an advanced, more sophisticated approach of tackling its actions. In light of the inability of the international community to adequately understand and counter the threat imposed, the final section of this paper will provide an introduction to the expansion of ISIS in the region of South Asia, which will later be followed up by a detailed paper by EFSAS regarding the group gaining presence in South Asia. This paper will provide a brief overview of the *modus operandi* and level of influence the terrorist group has in the countries of Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, alongside with the dynamics of potential conflict or cooperation vis-à-vis other Islamist extremist organizations operative in the region. Simultaneously, it will closely look at the involvement of ISIS affiliated members from South Asian origin in the perpetration or plotting of terrorist attacks in the West, highlighting the transnational threat emanating from the brewing radicalization in the Indian subcontinent.

This paper will conclude with specific policy recommendations for addressing the rise and spread of ISIS in the region; considering the hybrid nature of the terrorist outfit, it will further argue that an effective response to ISIS must involve a multifaceted approach on behalf of intelligence, law enforcement, civil society, religious and educational institutions, and others, which could address all the various dimensions of the operations of the group and prevent it from redesigning itself and reassembling. Alike the cutting off of a Hydra's head, ISIS manages to resurrect itself in a different form and increase its capacity for perpetrating violent attacks, due to its unpredictability and adaptability; hence, coordinated efforts should be focused on understanding how this hybrid network operates in order to break all its separate components and paralyze it. However, it is crucial to note that ISIS cannot be entirely eradicated until and unless the idea, which keeps reverberating in the hearts and minds of its disillusioned followers, and is self-sustainably reproducing and spreading itself, is uprooted and destroyed. As Walt argues, *"declaring total victory over a movement like the Islamic State is like declaring victory over winter as soon as the last snowfall end"*.

Therefore, this paper will claim that an ultimate triumph over ISIS could only happen by minimizing the reasons of its adherents to join ISIS ranks and sacrifice themselves in the name of *Jihad,* and provide them with viable opportunities and incitements to live and flourish instead. Unless a contrary idea is built, which could replace the initial one, by discrediting it and making it seem less appealing for the majority of the believers, all endeavours to defeat ISIS will remain insufficient, since the group will manage to reemerge from the ashes with a brand new identity.

Organisational framework

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has been considered *"overthrown"* on numerous occasions – the US and its allies have claimed to have defeated its leadership more than once. Indeed what was considered a territorial *"caliphate"* in Iraq and Syria back in the summer of 2014, has now been diminished to a small cell, with ISIS losing in 2019 the last pocket of its territory and political dominion over the local population. However, despite the demise of its physical caliphate, ISIS remains a threat, considering its hybrid organizational nature, which allows it to regroup back into its battle-hardened figure. Frank G. Hoffman, Distinguished Research Fellow with the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University, Washington DC, has been among the first to provide a theoretical definition of hybrid warfare. Drawing upon his work, Scott Jasper and Scott Moreland, lecturers in the Center for Civil-Military Relations at the Naval Postgraduate School, explain how an entity that utilizes hybrid tactics possesses the following characteristics:

- *"**Blended Tactics.** Hybrid threats combine conventional military capabilities with small unit guerrilla tactics, asymmetric attacks, and highly mobile standoff engagement systems.*
- ***Flexible and adaptable structure.** Hybrid threats are generally composed of paramilitary forces that can organize both in massed conventional formations and as small, distributed cells. Hybrid threats create a governance component to establish stability and sustain operations.*
- ***Terrorism.** Hybrid threats utilize terror campaigns to proliferate hate and despair and to strike fear in adversaries. They target cultural icons and symbols to destroy the identities, heritages, and belief systems that oppose their ideologies.*
- ***Propaganda and information warfare.** Hybrid threats exploit global communications networks to spread jihadist schemes, raise funds, and recruit.*
- ***Criminal activity**. Hybrid threats use crime and fundraising as reliable sources of revenue to fight, train, recruit, govern, and sustain operations.*
- ***Disregard for International Law.** Hybrid threats cynically view international laws as a constraint upon their adversaries that can be exploited".*

ISIS not only exhibits the abovementioned characteristics and uses similar approaches in its operations – the group tends to blur the lines between conventional and non-conventional warfare by resorting to the utilization of various weapons and military strategies, implementation of terrorist tactics, deployment of criminal activities for funding and maintaining its activities, while heavily relying on the mainstream and social media for disseminating its message and attracting new adherents.
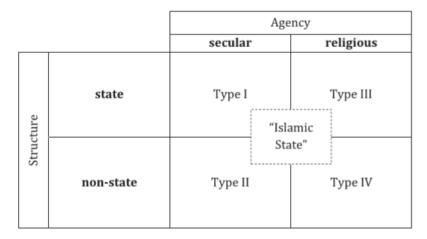
Although during the hey-day of ISIS, the group assumed a complex bureaucratic system with checks and balances, which was overseeing its military, legal, financial and social organs, while having a division of roles and responsibilities, researchers such as Matthew Phillips, Professor of Criminal Justice and Criminology at the University of North Carolina and Matthew Valasik, Professor of Sociology and Criminology at Louisiana State University, claim that *"…even with this vertically integrated hierarchy, it remained administratively decentralized".* Despite that the leadership claimed control over the entirety of the territory and every member of the group, in reality the structure was much more diffused, where individual actors were responsible for different provinces and tasks. As Phillips and Valasik further argue, *"…this diffuse structure provides a great deal of flexibility and operational stamina, insulating the Islamic State from the competitors' disruptions by allowing mid-level supervisors to be replaced as needed".* Such decentralised approach prevents from a potential infiltration to the upper organisational layers and creates a malleable web of agents with various

responsibilities and functions, which could be easily replaced when needed, making law enforcement targeting efforts particularly challenging.

In addition to that, scholars such as Jenna Jordan, Professor of International Affairs at the Georgia Institute of Technology, highlight the fact that ISIS further enjoys the affiliation of other terrorist groups and lone wolves, which act on their behalf in other parts of the world, such as the region of South Asia. Having such intricate network of terrorist outfits and actors displays a reality where the implementation of the objectives of the group does not depend on the leadership *per se*; instead, *"…the ideology becomes self-sustaining"*, as Jordan argues.

Hence, what needs to be recognised is the fact that ISIS is not a homogenous entity; rather it consists of various semi-associated clusters of actors, groups and individuals, who could even operate independently. Jodok Troy, researcher at the Department of Political Science at the University of Innsbruck, Austria, further breaks down this claim and presents a more detailed conceptualization of ISIS' structure.

Source: Jodok Troy (2019): "The containment of the Islamic State: A realist case to engage a hybrid actor", Contemporary Security Policy.

According to him, the subject is defined through the interplay of its essence ("structure") and justification for its *modus operandi* ("agency"). He further separates those alternatives on the basis of the denominators of secular/religious and state/non-state actors. In this graph, he positions Islamic State in the middle, since he argues that it cannot be reduced to any of the separate types as its hybrid structure tends to overlap with the characteristics of all four separate categories. In short, Troy claims that ISIS *"…is a revolutionary movement that replaced existing state structures with different ones, yet it is also a brutal insurgent organization motivated by a theo-political agenda. "New" is the global visibility of ISIS' violent spectacle"*. ISIS is not solely a terrorist organization – it is simultaneously a wannabe State and a politicized pseudo-religious extremist movement. Yet, in order to comprehensively conceive that, one needs to closely examine the ideology on which ISIS relies.

Ideology

The group claims to adhere to the doctrines of the Jihadi-Salafist and Wahhabist schools of thought. The basis of the ideology lies in the belief of a restoration of an Islamic caliphate and that all *"pure"* Muslims – meaning Sunni – must pledge allegiance to it, while the *kaffirs* (infidels) and those who practice *"inferior"* version of Islam and defile or contaminate the true spirit of the religion must be purged of apostasy, which often translates in brutal sectarian killings. Another major tenet of the ISIS ideology is the belief in the final Day of Judgment, which implies an apocalyptic doomsday and preludes to an anticipated end of time, which supposedly justifies the group's exorbitant levels of

violence and affinity towards destruction, massive killings and suicide attacks. Essential part of the ideology of ISIS was the decisive battle in the historic city of Dabiq, Syria and its subsequent recapture, which would have signified the mighty defeat of *'Western powers'* and ensuing triumph of its Islamic caliphate. Ironically, as put forward by Troy, Dabiq, which was considered the *"site of an apocalyptical showdown",* was swiftly forsaken when the anti-ISIS forces approached.

Hence, as suggested by a report issued by the Joint Special Operations University, US, *"…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".*

The ideology of ISIS is largely superficial and strategic, aiming at establishing a fit-all narrative, which allows it to broaden its pool for recruitment and reach out to a bigger audience which will facilitate the implementation of its objectives. This argument is also substantiated by Dr. Lina Khatib, Head of the Middle East and North Africa Programme at Chatham House, who states that *"…ideology is not the group's primary purpose; it is a tool to acquire power and money. The group (…) continuously interprets sharia in ways that justify its actions".*

The abovementioned is further corroborated by a joint-written letter of more than 120 Muslim scholars from around the world, who denounced *'point-by-point'* the ideology of ISIS through close reading of the Quran and other religious Islamic scriptures, and highlighted the group's unfound and sacrilegious logic.

Mainstream & Online Media Apparatus

The pervasive hypocrisy of ISIS is further visible through its online propaganda strategy. While waging a *'holy war'* against the West and Western influence, comparing it with amorality and depravity, ISIS tends to opportunistically take advantage of Western technological advancements, such as the Internet and social media, in order to further its objectives and use it against Western societies.

As explained in EFSAS' Study Paper ["Cyber-radicalization: Combating terrorism in the digital era",](#) alongside with the genesis of the Internet, mass media and social media outlets have facilitated the processes of globalization, removing any previously perceived barriers. Yet, the very same mechanisms, which have transformed our community and have catalyzed socio-economic and political movements, have also been recognized by terrorist organizations, such as ISIS, and exploited in the pursuit of their objectives.

Undoubtedly, ISIS has established itself as the biggest pioneer in making great use of the virtual space for the purposes of conducting its operations and consolidating its influence and control. Since its very establishment, the members of the extremist organization started taking advantage of online platforms to promulgate their ideology and foster others, especially young disenfranchised individuals, to support their cause, travel to the Middle East and participate in acts of terrorism. The group further encouraged sympathizers to engage in lone-wolf terrorist attacks in other places around the world, often through the dissemination of elaborate high-quality video propaganda, which glamourized their actions and constructed around them an aura of eminence and mightiness. Often, the propaganda involved pictures and videos of dead children or fellow Muslims, in order to represent their fight as a holy war against the West or any other force considered oppressive. Their success was additionally fueled by their ability of rebranding the whole Jihadi phenomenon and promote it as a stardom - turning it into an appealing subculture through the use of online magazines, clothing, rap videos, memes, political humor and other trending currents, which intrigue the young audiences.

Apart from being ideologically seductive and cunning, these groups have also emerged as highly innovative and entrepreneurial in terms of techniques of advertising themselves. One of ISIS' most successful ventures was the Arabic-language application for mobile devices called *'The Dawn of Glad Tidings'*, or simply *'Dawn'*, which for a while was available for download in Google and Apple App stores and allowed its followers to keep up with the latest activities of the group in real time. Downloading the app enabled ISIS to gain temporary control over the Twitter account of the user and post tweets on his behalf, the content of which was determined by a member of ISIS' social-media operation team. The tweets included text, links, hashtags, and images, and the same content was re-tweeted by all the accounts signed up with the application. This *'Dawn'* app is a vivid example of how ISIS succeeded in generating a considerable amount of traffic on Twitter and exploit the accounts of its users in order to expand the reach of its agenda.

A manual guide, titled *"Media Operative, You Are a Mujahid, Too"*, issued by the Islamic State's official publishing house, the Himmah Library, in 2016, further laid down the framework of attracting ISIS social media followers, willing to spread the ISIS word across the world and establishing the group's terrorist hegemony. As explained by Charlie Winter, Associate Fellow at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism and Senior Research Fellow at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) at King's College London, in a report issued by the ICSR, the booklet with instructions was primarily designed for targeting self-declared social media operatives, who were sympathetic to the production and dissemination of extremist propaganda. The report goes on designating such individuals *'media mujahidin'*, allowing mere onlookers or loosely affiliated supporters to ostensibly obtain a substantive role in the ISIS *'social ladder'* and induce a sense of mission:

> *"To every media operative brother in the Islamic State, you should know and be convinced of the following fact, [that] the media is a jihad in the way of Allah [and that] you, with your media work, are therefore a mujahid in the way of Allah".*

By claiming that, ISIS emphasizes on the fact that *"the media jihad against the enemy is no less important than the material fight against it"*, perpetuating the importance of its propaganda and aiming to attract more adherents, which will keep alive and circulate the ideology. The *Media Operative* document corroborates the argument that for ISIS, an Islamic caliphate must exist not only within the realm of a physical territory, but simultaneously have a *'caliphate of the mind'* installed in the virtual reality, which will eternalize the resilience of the group.

The *Virtual Caliphate* as coined by Winter, an allegiance of cyber-terrorist groups self-identified as the digital army of ISIS, commonly known under the umbrella names Islamic State Hacking Division or United Cyber Caliphate, has been committing cybercrime attacks, further advancing the objectives of the group. A notable example is the infiltration and hacking of the Twitter and YouTube accounts of the US Central Command (CENTCOM) in the Middle East and South Asia following the terrorist attack on the Charlie Hebdo magazine. The hackers replaced the official profile's avatar showing the American emblems with an image of a masked militant carrying the ISIS flag and the slogans *"CyberCaliphate"* and *"I love you ISIS"*. The account further shared messages, which supported the objectives of the terrorist group and implied that ISIS militants have entered US military installations. The embarrassment, which stemmed from this form of cyber vandalism, was substantiated by the irony that simultaneously to the hacking, President Barack Obama was delivering a speech in Washington on cyber security.

The United Cyber Caliphate, led by Junaid Hussain, a second-generation British national whose family migrated from Pakistan-administered Jammu & Kashmir, known by his *nom de guerre* Abu Hussain al-

Britani, claimed responsibility for the attack. Hussain was imprisoned in 2012 for hacking the account of former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, and after serving 6 months in jail, in 2013 he left for Syria to join ISIS where he became their chief English-language online influencer and was in charge with recruiting other cyber jihadists. As narrated by Nafees Hamid, associate fellow at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism—the Hague, according to accounts of his friends, Hussain became progressively radicalized after watching propaganda videos of the plight of Muslims in Kashmir and Palestine and he was soon joined by other *'hacktivists'* who shared similar views. He was linked to numerous pro-ISIS terrorist plots in Britain and the United States, which made him both a magnet for other foreign nationals who wanted to join the ranks of ISIS, and intelligence services who considered him highly dangerous due to his ability of inspiring international lone-wolf terrorism. On 5 August 2015, *The Sunday Times* declared him No.3 on the Pentagon's *"kill list",* only after Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Mohammed Emwazi (Jihadi John); on 24 August 2015, US government officials declared him death after the conduct of an air strike. His successor, Siful Haque Sujan, British-based businessman from Bangladeshi origin, was also killed in an air strike in December 2015.

As Hamid argues, *"Junaid Hussain's death marked the first time a hacker was considered enough of a threat to be killed by a drone strike. But the value he brought to the Islamic State extended beyond his practical skill sets; his recruitment was a symbolic victory for the Islamic State as well".*

Considering how the genesis of the Internet has facilitated the processes of globalization, removing any previously perceived barriers, it does not come as a surprise that ISIS endeavors of turning it into a potential playground for fulfilling their vision of a unified Muslim *Ummah* and continue fostering and inspiring violence through attracting would-be attackers. ISIS' *Virtual Caliphate* has imposed another strain on intelligence and law enforcement efforts, demonstrating how the terrorist outfit has transcended the traditional boundaries of counterinsurgency and its defeat will no longer take place merely in the physical world. As an article published by the Center for a New American Security argues, the virtual space creates a safe haven for ISIS, providing it with the opportunity to retreat and rebuild its capacity in order to carry on with its activities in the real world. It serves as a tool, which could easily disseminate its ideology, provide training and find potential recruits.

Nevertheless, it is essential to notice that ISIS never formally declared the Islamic State Hacking Division or United Cyber Caliphate as their *'digital army'*; yet, analysts believe that the reason behind not responding to the self-designation of the group is the lack of major cyber terrorist attacks perpetrated by it. Thus, any potential cyberattack, which is deemed *'worthy'* according the standards of ISIS, will most likely be swiftly claimed and used as an exemplar of their digital supremacy.

Financing Mechanisms

For the abovementioned purposes, ISIS affiliated entities and individuals have also recognised the utility and potency of the Dark Web as not only a communication and planning platform, but also an anonymised funding milieu. The Dark Web, initially created by the US forces for the purposes of maintaining their operations secret, is a hidden corner of the Internet, which is inaccessible for mainstream search engines and thus provides a veil of invisibility and untraceability for those who use it. Unsurprisingly, its value was quickly recognised by organised crime groups, hackers and extremists, who took use of it by turning it into a safe haven for illicit activities. ISIS has also taken advantage of the deepest layers of the virtual space to not only recruit, radicalize and coordinate attacks, but also to raise funds. The group has been using the Dark Web as a marketplace for stolen antiquities, fake identities, procurement of weapons and equipment, and cryptocurrency crowdsourcing. A notable example is the *SadaqaCoins,* cryptocurrency crowdsource platform for Jihadi fighters, which attracts donations. The platform's opening lines start with: *"Never will you attain the good (reward) until you*

spend (in the way of Allah) from that which you love. And whatever you spend — indeed, Allah is Knowing of it".

Reminiscent of the style of ISIS, such shrewd propaganda in the name of religion, has been designed to invite donors from around the world, who might not be willing to directly participate or act on behalf of the group, yet would like to contribute in monetary terms to the operations of the terrorist entity. Although experts conclude that crowdfunding pages on the Dark Web might not be as successful as initially envisioned, with the advancement and prosperity of cryptocurrencies the threat of such pages flourishing is not far from real. In addition, what they further manifest is not only the innovative and tech-savvy approach of ISIS in garnering funds, but also the group's profit-making yearnings, which tend to largely differentiate it from other terrorist organisations, and rendering it analogous to an organised crime network. As Phillips and Valasik claim, most extremist groups tend to resort to only one criminal activity as part of their arsenal for generating revenues, whereas:

> *"The Islamic State, on the other hand, picks up just about all kinds of profit-oriented crimes and graphic displays of violence, including extortion, bank robbery, looting, black market sales and cybercrimes. In that, they resemble street gangs, which often shift from conventional and straightforward crimes like robbery, burglary, drug selling, murder, and extortion to more intricate exploits like identity theft, racketeering, and even migrant smuggling and human trafficking".*

On those lines, terrorism studies researchers such as Patrick Blannin, has argued that ISIS has blurred the lines between terrorism and criminality, framing the so-called crime-terror nexus. Magnus Ranstorp, Research Director at the Centre for Asymmetric Threat Studies at the Swedish Defense University, further substantiates those claims through his study on ISIS recruits from Europe, who have been raising funds for the group through multiple microfinancing techniques, such as petty theft, fraudulent loan applications, social insurance fraud, and VAT fraud, within the European Union.

A closer examination of its financing mechanisms reveals a picture where the group displays the zealous ability of exhibiting a wide range of economic ventures for the purposes of financing its *Jihad*. As explained in a RAND Corporation report, titled *'Return and Expand?; The Finances and Prospects of the Islamic State After the Caliphate'*, while helming its physical caliphate in Syria and Iraq, ISIS was predominantly relying on its revenue from the oil and gas fields it controlled, simultaneously to that the group derived earnings from taxing and fining the population, smuggling archaeological artefacts, confiscations, transit-related taxes, and others, which altogether during its prime time amounted to $1-2 billion a year. Whereas, when it did not control territory it resorted to other criminal activities, highlighting how it *"maintains the capacity for significant adaptability and resilience to changing circumstances, battlefield environments, and economic shocks, sometimes deviating from its basic principles to ensure its survival as an organization".* In addition, the RAND report argues that since the terrorist outfit has in reserve hundreds of millions of dollars, the sustainability of ISIS in the upcoming years is secured, despite the loss of physical territory. This paper will further explore this notion, by focusing on the expansion of the terror group to other regions, such as the Indian subcontinent.

Islamic State in South Asia
In response to the failure of ISIS of establishing a fully-fledged State, Winter puts forward a perspicacious question:

> *"What if, more than anything else including territory, the group (ISIS) just wants to be the ideological hegemon of global jihadism? In this pursuit, the realization of ideological*

aspirations is far more important than the permanent administration of any piece of land, even if it comes at great material cost".

And indeed, this section will explore the ideological expansion of ISIS to the region of South Asia; it will argue that while the central leadership in Syria and Iraq might not have had any direct communiqué with the terrorist groups there, the idea of an utopian Islamic Caliphate has managed to infiltrate the minds of South Asian extremists, trespassing any cultural and socio-political boundaries, obliquely fulfilling the objectives of ISIS for worldwide supremacy. As explained in EFSAS Commentary ["Terror attacks in Sri Lanka: Could South Asia become a prospective hotbed of the Islamic State?"](#), the depicted narrative of an Islamic State by ISIS has shown the capability and flexibility to adapt itself with particular unmet needs of the people in different regions, taking advantage of local contexts such as political instability, corruption, public discontent and ongoing inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflicts, thus presenting its utopia in accordance with regional demands.

Taking the example of the Indian-administered part of Jammu & Kashmir, in May 2019, ISIS declared the establishment of a new branch in the region, called *"Wilayah of Hind"*. The announcement took place after clashes between terrorists and Indian security forces, and highlights ISIS ability of crafting a link between local issues and its own global ambitions. ISIS flags have been sporadically waved across the region of Jammu & Kashmir since 2016, and although some analysts have deduced that the physical presence of ISIS in Jammu & Kashmir is highly unlikely, what must be indicated is that ISIS operates as an umbrella network for various local terrorist groups, who pledge allegiance to the ideology of an utopian worldwide Muslim Caliphate, thus the *'dream'* of an Islamic State is no longer constrained to the previous territorial perimeters of the Middle East.

As Dr. Colin P. Clarke, an associate fellow at the International Centre for Counterterrorism (ICCT) - The Hague and an adjunct senior political scientist at the RAND Corporation, argues in regards to the newly established province: *"Just like a multinational corporation, IS is expanding operations in some areas, while downsizing and streamlining capabilities in other parts of the organization … IS is hedging its bets by dispersing organisational affiliates across the globe".*

Through decentralization efforts, ISIS reduces its risk of downfall and spreads its chances for success. Clarke, while taking the example of the region of South Asia, further explains that it is erroneous to perceive ISIS as a monolithic entity, as one could observe the mushrooming of multiple *'wilayahs',* run by affiliated groups which exploit the local socio-political scenarios and grow their own capabilities. In addition, by acting under the banner of ISIS, such groups strive to obtain the status of *'true'* defender of Islam.

Such events actually accentuate the evolution of a new type of terrorism in the region. The sudden heave of Pan-Islamism in Kashmir's Muslim society has gradually marginalized the initial pro-nationalist agenda of a so-called insurgency. As Siddharthya Roy, a New Delhi-based correspondent on South Asian affairs for *The Diplomat* argues, *"For the younger generation of jihadis, Kashmir and its struggle for independence would be led by sharia and not Kashmiri nationalism which, for them, was a failed cause".*

Other scholars such as Abdul Basit, Associate Research Fellow at the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, even go further arguing that with the influx of ISIS ideology in South Asia this completely new generation of militants is not even bound by religious beliefs as much as it is *"overtly sectarian and unapologetically brutal and indiscriminate".* According to him, a new wave of young educated jihadists from middle and upper-class families living in urban areas, who are

tech-savvy and have a robust social media know-how for the purposes of recruitment, propaganda and organisational planning, have been dissatisfied with the older generation as being narrow-minded, *"status quo oriented and not doing enough"*. Basit claims that since that group does not necessarily carry the same historical grievances and baggage as their predecessors, they are much more ideologically detached and thus lured by ideas of globally oriented militancy and Sunni supremacism, which falls in line with ISIS deceitful ideological rhetoric. As a result, in their search for identity and status, while holding grudges against the older generation, they easily fall prey to ISIS propaganda.

This is particularly visible from the case of the Easter attacks in Sri Lanka. As described in EFSAS Commentary ["The real tragedy of the Easter attacks in Sri Lanka is that they could have been averted"](#), on 21 April 2019, Easter Sunday, nine suicide bombers, including a pregnant woman, carried out as many as 8 high intensity blasts in various parts of the country killing 259 people and injuring at least 500, making it one of the deadliest terrorist attacks the world had witnessed in years. The Sri Lankan government issued a statement claiming that responsibility of the attacks could be attributed to the National Thowheeth Jamath (NTJ), a local militant Islamist group previously known for the destruction of Buddhist statues. Two days after the attacks, ISIS published on its *Amaq News Agency* that the perpetrators were Islamic State fighters, yet the Criminal Investigation Department of Sri Lanka argued that such links cannot be definitively established, raising questions how the NTJ has managed to orchestrate a string of suicide bombings of such colossal magnitude. Another factor that left intelligence services perplexed was the profile of the attackers; the majority of them did not conform to the stereotypical profile of terrorists from poor, uneducated background, instead most of them were well-educated, from middle-class families, while two of the attackers were the sons of an influential wealthy spice tycoon, who both enjoyed public appearances.

Following the abovementioned, despite the fact that the level of involvement on behalf of ISIS cannot be entirely proven, the influence of ISIS in South Asia is not easily dismissible. As Clarke argues: *"Attacks like the Easter Massacre in Sri Lanka serve the Islamic State by keeping it in the headlines and improving group morale by displaying the capability to launch spectacular attacks"*. What needs to be understood is that even if ISIS tendency of *'claiming responsibility'* for attacks does not necessarily reflect the real circumstances behind their orchestration, it remains irrelevant; what the group achieves by doing so, is manipulating and shaping public perceptions, which is oftentimes more important than the execution of the attacks itself.

The case of the Easter bombings is someway reminiscent of the July 2016 attack in Dhaka, Bangladesh at the Holey Artisan Bakery, where more than 20 people got killed and while the perpetrators, who were all educated from very well-off families, belonged to a local terrorist Islamic organization Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen, ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack, highlighting the aspirations of local jihadist groups for joining the vision of establishing an Islamic Caliphate. Following the attack, Abu Issa al-Bengali, a Bangladeshi terrorist allegedly fighting for ISIS in Syria released a video, stating: *"What you witnessed in Bangladesh was a glimpse. This will repeat, repeat and repeat until you lose and we win and the sharia is established throughout the world"*.

This is not the first time ISIS has claimed responsibility for attacks in Bangladesh. As EFSAS' Study Paper ["The rise of Political Islam and Islamist Terrorism in Bangladesh"](#) explains, ISIS formally announced its presence in Bangladesh in November 2015, with the publication of an article titled *'The Revival of Jihad in Bengal'* in its English language magazine *'Dabiq'*, including an interview with Sheikh Abu al-Hanif, allegedly the leader of ISIS operations in the country. ISIS has taken responsibility over various attacks on foreigners, homosexuals, secular and liberal bloggers, Sufis, Ahmadis and those belonging

to religious minorities. Despite the various attacks claimed by ISIS, Bangladesh's government has persistently continued to deny the presence of ISIS on its soil and has preferred to cast blame on the *'neo-JMB'*. The *'neo-Jamaat-ul Mujahideen'* faction – which refers to itself as Islamic State Bangladesh - was thought to be under the leadership of a Canadian-Bangladeshi, Tamim Chowdhury, until his death in August 2016 in an alleged extrajudicial killing.

A comprehensive report on the ISIS phenomenon in South Asia issued by the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) further delves into the presence of the terrorist outfit in Bangladesh. The author, Kabir Taneja, Fellow at the ORF's Strategic Studies programme, provides the case study of Abu Sulaiman, a former JMB member, and Mohammed Mosiuddin (alias Abu Musa), resident of West Bengal, who conspired about perpetrating lone-wolf attacks in the name of ISIS against western targets and consolidating the influence of the group in the region. Taneja gives a profound description of the social media communication and planning of Mosiuddin in reaching out to other radicalized individuals and Sulaiman's travels to India and Indian-administered Jammu & Kashmir for the purposes of initiating ISIS inspired protests. Taneja concludes by saying that the attempts of the aforementioned individuals came to fruition due to financial constraints, yet what is more important, is that this case study highlights the underexplored phenomenon of pro-ISIS radicalized individuals in India and the opportunity for expansion due to the close proximity of the two countries. Although the figures could be considered statistically irrelevant owing to their small number measured per capita, for security purposes, each and every case should be considered important and a matter of concern.

For a country with a Muslim population of 200 million, the roughly 200 mapped out pro-ISIS cases do not particularly worry the Indian State. In addition to that, most of them originate from the state of Kerala, which has a long history of migration flows between Indian citizens and Arab traders from the Gulf countries, as a result of which the spread of Salafi-Wahhabist ideology has been facilitated alongside with the establishment of Saudi Arabia-funded madrassas. Moreover, Indian experts consider other factors responsible for the radicalization of Indian Muslims in other regions, including the rise of Hindu right wing inspired violence against Muslims and the underrepresentation of Muslims in Indian public life and power corridors. Therefore, although correctly argued that the negligible number of pro-ISIS cells in India, outcome of the strong sense of nationalism, which comes before religious identity among the Indian Muslim population, should be considered a success case in the region of South Asia. However, considering that the ISIS ideology- and propaganda machine are still strong and alive, altogether with having some potential rifts between societies, security experts must remain alert for potential dangers.

The case of the *@ShamiWitness* Twitter account, which belonged to Mehdi Biswas, a marketing executive from India's Silicon Valley, Bengaluru, points out that the threat of ISIS cyber radicalization remains tangible in the country. The social media account was considered the most influential ISIS propagandist Twitter account, having been followed by two-thirds of all the foreign jihadis. Surprisingly, as brought up by Taneja, even during its peak days, the profile was not flagged by Indian authorities, which was widely considered a failure on behalf of Indian intelligence agencies. Thus, the risk of the proliferation of online ISIS sympathisers in India remains acute.

Another fraction of ISIS in South Asia which ought to be discussed with regard to its notably different set up and *modus operandi* is the Islamic State – Khorosan Province (ISKP). As Niamatullah Ibrahimi and Shahram Akbarzadeh, researchers at the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation, Deakin University, Australia argue, *"many underestimated ISIS's capacity to establish roots in the already crowded jihadi scene of Afghanistan and Pakistan".* The reason for that was a belief that ISIS has had an ideology alien to the region and thus will not be able to establish foothold. Moreover, the

group had to encounter the regional hegemon, the Taliban, which was having an ownership over the jihadist landscape of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Yet, as a surprise to those opinions, the group was established in January 2015, and appointed former Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) terrorist Hafiz Saeed Khan and former Afghan Taliban commander Abdul Rauf Aliza as its leaders, who were both subsequently killed in US drone strikes. Nevertheless, ISIS continued to actively recruit defectors from the Taliban, who were disenfranchised with the terrorist organization. ISKP's control was further boosted by the involvement of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which joined forces and declared that they were supporters of ISKP's cause for a Khorasan province. However, it needs to be noted that ISKP in its structure is more like a cartel, which comprises of disgruntled former members of other fragmented terrorist groups, such as the TTP, IMU, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and Jaish-e-Mohammed. As Yaqoob ul Hassan, Fellow of the policy platform South Asian Voices, has argued: *"These terrorist outfits tasked to operate under the banner of ISKP are more like a marriage of convenience than a union based on shared ideology"*. It is evident that these terrorist outfits are extremely dependent on each other in order to survive.

In addition, the announced US troops withdrawal from Afghanistan without a peace deal with the Taliban might strengthen the operational capacity of ISIS, making it take advantage of a new landscape after its fall in Syria and Iraq. This is a highly worrisome scenario, since unlike the rest of the South Asian countries where ISIS mostly influences local jihadist groups which perpetrate terrorist attacks in a domestic context in the name of the group, ISKP relies on support from the central leadership of ISIS and is thus aiming at establishing tangible territorial dominion in Afghanistan and parts of Pakistan. Even more because, as Ibrahimi and Akbarzadeh analyse, the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, with whom ISIS has been in a strategic rivalry over control of territory and material resources, have also oftentimes appeared as informal collaborators in the implementation of a joint cause, and even had members exchange or maintain dual loyalties. Such complex jihadi synergy poses an additional strain to international and domestic efforts of fighting the group.

Effective strategies

Considering the hybrid nature of the terror group, an effective response to ISIS must involve a multifaceted approach on behalf of intelligence, law enforcement, the military, civil society, the financial sector, religious and educational institutions, cyber-security agencies and others, which could address all the various dimensions of the operations of the group and prevent it from redesigning itself and reassembling. The ability of ISIS to disseminate its ideology in regions plagued with insurgency, growing radicalization and political instability has to be taken into account by governments in South Asia as well as the international community in order to halt the influence of ISIS in the region. Cooperation and intelligence-sharing among South Asian countries should be facilitated and these countries should take the lead in implementing policies that compliment global objectives and stem the tide of radicalization in the region as growing interrelated stakes, increasingly demand a collective approach against this global threat. Yet, as Taneja warns, intra-South Asian combined strategies on intelligence sharing might confront a stumbling block vis-à-vis Pakistan, which is known to be sponsoring terrorism for meeting its own (strategic) ends, and thus might thwart such collective idea in order to safeguard its interests.

For those purposes, the international community and global watchdogs such as the Financial Action Task Force should keep Pakistan under scrutiny and compel it to fulfil its obligations under the international legal framework in regards to counter-terrorism and terrorism financing efforts. As per the latter, respective officials should be responsible for tracking down businesses and individuals, which fund the operations of the group in order to halt the incoming money flow. Terrorism is a syndicate-based activity; its business is to induce fear and, in order to generate that fear, terrorism,

like any other business, requires money. As long as money flows, terrorism will continue to sustain itself. Thus, law enforcement agencies should collaborate with financial authorities in addressing the perilous crime-terror nexus and tackle the diverse portfolio of criminal activities that ISIS is resorting to for the purposes of generating funds.

As the RAND report argues, *"…the Islamic State's caliphate was never just territorial. It was always a caliphate of the mind"*; hence, ISIS cannot be entirely eradicated until and unless the idea, which keeps reverberating in the hearts and minds of its disillusioned followers, and is self-sustainably reproducing and spreading itself, is uprooted and destroyed. Thus, there is an imperative need of alternative narratives, which not simply counteract the propaganda campaigns of the terrorist group, but further provide and encourage new legitimate outlets for development and personal growth of the young generation. The introduction of a counter-narrative should subvert and counter every facet of the extremist narrative, more specifically the religious, social, political, historical, psychological and economic aspects. However, crafting the *'right'* message will not simply solve the problem – conveying a counter-extremism message, without having the right network to re-convey it, will be futile. This is where the importance of civil society, religious and educational institutions come forward. Muslim religious leaders and community representatives bear the responsibility of exposing the treacherous nature of the ideology of ISIS, discrediting its image and reinforcing the positive values of Islam, while discouraging individuals who pursue membership and affiliation. This is an essential step of instilling tools of critical thinking and awareness in those susceptible to the dangers and drivers of radicalization. Digital literacy classes must be promoted especially among the youth in order to encourage their analytical thinking and critical media content analysis. Considering the omnipresence of the internet, people will inevitably stumble across questionable or extremist materials, however it is the attitude to those materials which will define their actions – whether they will engage with it or report it.

Meantime, Western societies should also be made aware of the spread of Islamophobia, which further reinforces sentiments of discrimination, prejudice and marginalisation among the Muslim population, which could sometimes translate into religious extremism. As Jasper and Moreland argue, *"Western onlookers have grown de-sensitized to images of violence against civilians in faraway lands. Moreover, distrust of Muslim communities in Europe and North America has risen sharply in the wake of recent extremist attacks".* As the case study of Junaid Hussain illustrated, in the wake of normalisation of international war and conflict on behalf of Western countries and rise of populist governments, some Muslim immigrants might feel fraught with feelings of injustice against their fellow Muslims abroad. Such young people, who find themselves hopelessly cradled between angst, wrath and ideology, become an easy pray for terrorist recruiters, who exploit their feelings of indignation and desire for action and retribution.

As a recent article of *The International Policy Digest* pinpoints, charged rhetoric on behalf of world leaders against Muslim communities further adds oil to the fire. As the author Michael Dombrowski argues, US President Donald Trump's speech during the announcement of the death of Al-Baghdadi was highly worrisome owing to its inflammatory nature: *"Labeling al-Baghdadi as a "dog" and a "coward," the words that President Trump used could contribute to a sense of "otherness" that could lead some Muslims to radicalize. An individual who feels out of place in his home may hear these terms used to describe not only a terrorist leader, but also a Muslim, and feel that a state leader is targeting their religion, and themselves by extension",* Dombrowski says.

Terrorist groups like ISIS opportunistically and strategically use such rhetoric in order to justify its *Jihad* against the West, drawing upon vulnerable impressionable individuals and perpetuating a cycle of

violence. It is vitally important for the international community to address Islamophobia, xenophobia and populist sentiments effectively through educational media campaigns which promote religious tolerance, understanding, raise awareness about religious hate crime and foster judicial institutions to hold perpetrators accountable. In addition to that, Western intervention in international conflicts and warzones in Muslim countries, if at all required, should take place in accordance with the wishes of the indigenous populations and be adapted to the local geo-political, socio-economic and religious contexts.

And finally, credible alternative narratives need to be established, where those subject to extremist radicalization are provided viable opportunities for development and be given new positive purpose in life, which could happen through improved socio-economic conditions, diversified job prospects, better representation of Muslims in public sphere, fostering feelings of acceptance and belonging. Governmental and civil society should reinforce the idea that positive change does not take place only through means of violence, but could be achieved through being a fundamental part of a cohesive society, which works together through lawful means to eradicate the threat.

Conclusion

As expressed throughout this paper, the death of Al-Baghdadi does not even slightly dent the operational capacity of the Islamic State. The terrorist network does not fetishize leaders as it maintains a rich pool of people with whom they could be easily and quickly replaced with. As argued, it is essential to understand the hybrid structure, ideology and rationale behind its operations in order to generate an effective counter-response on behalf of the forces combating it. Alike cancer, which is not an illness *per se,* but a name given to a collection of related diseases, ISIS is a network of various jihadist actors, which operate under the same banner and tend to collaborate in the pursuit of their common goals. Thus, the *Islamic State* is more analogues to a parasitic organism, which finds different hosts and adapts structurally to their way of functioning.

The region of South Asia has also become amongst its victims, experiencing the proliferation of ISIS-affiliated terrorist groups, which instigate violent extremism among the population.

The defeat of the ISIS ideology is imperative for peace and stability not only of the Indian subcontinent, but the entire world; in order to achieve that, while still relying on hard power in addressing the terrorist threat, governments should resort to humanitarian approaches and civil society initiatives so that they could alongside with restoring their legitimacy amongst the population, further provide opportunities for society's positive growth and flourishment.