

Selective Writings of

ANIMESH ROUL

Society for the Study of Peace & Conflict
New Delhi

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Myanmar's young government must contain

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INDIA'S LEFT- EXTREMISTS

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by Animesh Roul and Akanshya Shah



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TURMOIL IN THE HIMALAYAS, AUTUMN 2016

WHO OWNS BALOCHISTAN?

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No End in Sight for Syria

How did we get here, and where can we go?

by Animesh Roul



THE SYRIAN civil war has so far witnessed genocide, ethnic cleansing, sectarian schisms, and crimes against humanity. According to data available in March 2017, an estimated 400,000 Syrians have been killed and more than 10 million people have either fled the country or been displaced. What started in the city of Daara in March 2011—a popular demonstration against the incumbent Bashar al-Assad regime, a subsequent government crackdown, and the military siege of the city—has snowballed into a protracted civil war that has overwhelmed the country with large-scale divisions and destruction. There is no end in sight to this complicated conflict, which has surreptitiously engulfed neighbouring Gulf nations and engaged the great powers of the world. Trump and Putin may be cozying up, but their guns are aimed at each other in Syria.

The civil war has been fought primarily between the Syrian government forces, along with allies, and forces opposing the Assad regime, but there exists a plethora of players whose military allegiances are often more opportunistic than ideological. They include the Assad regime, Kurdish forces, Daesh (Islamic State or ISIS), Jaish al Fateh (a jihadi alliance

affiliated with Al-Qaeda), and a conglomeration of moderate rebel groups such as the Free Syrian Army, along with regional and global players such as the U.S., Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran.

From the beginning, the United States has remained steadfast in its efforts to counter the Assad regime's atrocities against civilians and other humanitarian emergencies in the country, especially the use of banned chemical weapons in Ghouta and Khan Sheikhoun. Against this, the Assad regime's request for military and economic support to hold on to power materialised with help from its international allies, Russia and Iran. Russia's September 2015 intervention in the guise of helping the Syrian regime against ISIS and other

From the beginning, the United States has remained steadfast in its efforts to counter the Assad regime.

militant factions initiated a new dimension to the conflict, which many have seen as part of a new cold war. Indeed, the Syrian crisis witnessed a further decline in already strained U.S.-Russia ties.

No End in Sight for Syria

Russia's clout with the Syrian government came into the open when Russian President Vladimir Putin convinced Assad to renounce his chemical stockpile and coaxed him to join the Chemical Weapons Convention. Putin's support for Assad was unconditional when the U.N. attempted to adopt resolutions that blamed Syrian government forces for human rights abuses and atrocities against its people. In late September 2015, Russia's Federation Council granted Putin permission to deploy Russian armed forces in Syria, initiating airstrikes against Daesh targets. Despite Syria's international isolation, Russia continues to extend military support in the name of fighting jihadists. Humanitarian aid, like food and medical supplies from Russia, ensure that Assad's government and its supporters continue to weather international criticism and the crisis.

Moscow's help in the destruction of rebel-held Aleppo is well documented. Although both Washington and Moscow want to eliminate Daesh, Russia's objectives were largely to extend military support to Assad's forces, targeting any anti-regime rebels, thus

securing Assad's position at the country's helm, which is in sharp contrast to America's objectives.

Russia has taken a more active, to not say meddling, role in the Middle Eastern affair by enhancing its bilateral ties with Syria and Iran. On many occa-

The Trump administration is taking steps to get further involved in Syria's multifaceted war.

sions, the U.S. and Russia have come face to face over Syria. While Russia along with Iran focused on helping Assad in repelling his rebellions at home, the U.S. has remained critical of the Assad regime for its anti-civilian campaigns. Many have seen the conflict as a new proxy war between the U.S. and Russia.

The United States and Russia share one common goal: to exterminate jihadist forces in both Syria and neighbouring Iraq. However, Russia is playing a vital role in the conflict by siding with Assad at home and in U.N. forums, vetoing every effort made by the international community against the regime. For this reason,

Russia is blamed for playing a double game as both mediator for diplomatic solutions and as Assad's de facto ally in the war. The country seems to have clear ambitions to counter the U.S.'s position as sole world superpower, and its successes—not least its visible ability to influence Assad's decisions where American threats had failed—are a sharp testament to America's declining international stature.

During the six years of the Syrian Civil War, direct U.S. involvement has remained largely focused on defeating Daesh, as well as helping anti-Assad rebels. In late April 2016, the Obama administration authorised the deployment of over a hundred U.S. troops to help train anti-Daesh fighters and anti-Assad Kurdish rebels. Although vehemently critical of Assad's human rights record and calling for Assad to be removed



Bashar al-Assad and Vladimir Putin



U.S. Navy Destroyers launching strikes against Syria

from power, the U.S.-led coalition has focused primarily on annihilating Daesh, opting for attempts to find diplomatic solutions to the civil war rather than military intervention. Unlike in Iraq, where the American coalition has many partners against Daesh, in Syria, U.S. agencies are still trying to woo diverse groups, including Syrian Kurds, Sunni Arabs, and Christian fighters, under the umbrella of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which are largely focused on toppling the Assad regime.

U.S. warships in the Mediterranean fired over 60 Tomahawk cruise missiles at the government-controlled Shayrat airfield.

From the beginning, in a clear retreat from the overt interventionism of his predecessor, President Obama's administration refrained from entangling itself in the Syrian Civil War, but it imposed sanctions on the Assad regime in the initial days of the war and issued intermittent condemnation of

Assad's alleged atrocities against his citizens. America has insisted that the regime step down to provide for a smooth, democratic transition in the country. Without direct military engagement or a single shot fired by the U.S. against Syrian interests, the sanctions have been considered a 'humanitarian and diplomatic war' against the Syrian regime.

Under the Trump administration, America appears prepared to extend more direct support to the Kurdish YPG as they seek to liberate Daesh-held areas. The new administration is also considering enhancing its troop deployment. While still wary of direct action in the conflict, the Trump administration is taking steps to get further involved in Syria's multifaceted war. The chemical attacks in Khan Sheikhoun in April 2017 may have compelled the new American administration to shift from a covert Syria strategy to a more robust engagement that openly confronts Russian interests. In August 2013, the Ghouta chemical weapon incident generated powerful anti-Assad sentiments in international forums; only Russian intervention at the U.N. stopped the U.S. and its allies from acting against the Assad regime. The failure to act against Assad, even after he had crossed

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what had been described as a “red line”, weakened the U.S.’s standing. However, the new, devastating nerve gas attack in early April sparked renewed international outrage against Assad and his regime’s widespread use of chemical weapons.

There is unlikely to be a direct confrontation with Russia, but the two nations have already suspended their hotline.

In retaliation for the Khan Sheikhou chemical weapons attack, U.S. warships in the Mediterranean fired over 60 Tomahawk cruise missiles at the government-controlled Shayrat airfield in the Homs province of Syria, targeting the base from which the chemical attack had been launched. Syria, along with its allies, called this a violation of international law and an act of aggression. In mid-May this year, U.S. strikes against a convoy of suspected Assad regime forces and Iranian proxies in the al-Tanf area of southeastern Syria was again considered a violation of Syria’s sovereignty. On June 18, the U.S. resolve to stay out of Syrian quagmire seemed to be ending as the U.S. military shot down a Syrian warplane near the city of Tabqah in northern Syria. The U.S. claimed that this was defensive fire, as

the ill-fated Syrian warplane was targeting the U.S.-backed, anti-Daesh Syrian Democratic Forces. This incident adds a new dimension to U.S. involvement in Syria. There is unlikely to be a direct confrontation with Russia, but the two nations have already suspended the hotline arrangement dating back to the Cold War, and Moscow has already warned that it will treat any U.S. combat aircraft flying in Syrian airspace as an aggressor against Bashar al-Assad’s regime and Russia’s interests.

Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev’s comments about a ‘new Cold War’ in February last year at the Munich Security Conference in Germany seem prophetic. Despite Trump and Putin’s apparent comradeship, tensions in Syria are taking relations in another direction. While many observers are praising Putin for reinvigorating Moscow’s outreach in the Middle East, his actual motives could be deeper, designed to challenge the post-Cold-War unipolar world by assuming a more influential role in key regions. ■

Animesh Roul is a New Delhi-based public policy analyst, with specializations in counterterrorism, radical Islam, terror financing, and other issues relating to armed conflict.



2011 street protests in Damascus, Syria



Muslim vs. Buddhist

Myanmar's young government must contain its growing ethnic divide.

by Animesh Roul



WHEN Muslim militants attacked Myanmar's border police in the western Rakhine State, the Buddhist-majority nation's security forces struck back against the region's vulnerable Muslim minority, who do not have citizen rights. The decade-old conflict between ethnic Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya (Bengali) Muslims has drawn international attention. There is a severe risk in the embattled Southeast Asian country that the clashes could spark both a militant Islamic insurgency against the state and a genocide against the Muslim minority population. Myanmar must somehow halt both.

Armed attacks against border police continued on and off for days toward the end of last year. An October 9 attack killed nine border policemen, and as many attackers died in the ensuing gun battles. A similar ambush on October 11 left four more policemen dead. Violence again erupted on November 12-13, when armed militants launched a surprise attack on a military convoy during a clearance operation in Ma Yinn Taung village in Maungdaw

town. Two security personnel, including a senior army officer, died in the ambush, while several suspected militants were killed. Subsequent government backed counter-insurgency operations in the area witnessed an escalation of armed clashes that claimed the lives of nearly 70 suspected Rohingya militants and 17 security force personnel.

Government forces have been accused of retaliating by razing entire villages of displaced Rohingya to the ground, with security forces allegedly killing over 500 people and raping women during one eviction last year, as reported in the Winter 2017 issue of

As thousands of homes were burnt, the rioting triggered a Rohingya refugee crisis that attracted transnational Islamic jihadi groups.

The Global Intelligence. Over 77,000 Rohingya Muslims have fled their homes since October. The United Nations has called it a "crime against humanity", while the Myanmar government has said it is merely the result of "security clearance sweeps" in its attempts to roust out militants. There is fear that the back-and-forth attacks

Muslim vs. Buddhist

between insurgents and government forces will escalate into a much worse conflict, with many innocents caught in the middle.

Rohingya Militancy

Despite the fact that no organized Islamist group claimed responsibility for the last year's attacks on the border posts, a Myanmar government investigation blamed the little-known Aqa-Mul Mujahidin (AMM) group. If the government investigations based on the statements of the arrested militants are correct, this may not be a local initiative. Jihadi videos in circulation point towards an operational link between AMM and Pakistan- and Bangladesh-based Rohingya Islamists.

Rohingyas are currently a stateless community, denied citizenship by both Myanmar and Bangladesh. Myanmar considers them illegal immigrants from neighboring Bangladesh, a country to which thousands of Rohingyas have fled. Islamist militancy in support of the minority Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar is not a novel phenomenon. Similar armed attacks against border police were reported in the area between February and May 2014. This spurt of violence traces its origin to the deadly June–October 2012 riots between Buddhists and Muslim Rohingyas that triggered huge losses of life and large-scale displacements. That year, many international rights agencies blamed Myanmar's government for a military crackdown against minority Rohingya Muslims. The government's information taskforce on the Rakhine situation rejected the allega-

tions of military excess. A report by the International Crisis Group suggested that both Muslim and Buddhist communities were grateful for the protection provided by the military during the riots. As thousands of homes were burnt, the rioting triggered a Rohingya refugee crisis that attracted transnational Islamic jihadi groups to support a nascent armed movement against Myanmar's government.

Call for Organized Jihad

The propaganda machinery of Rohingya militant groups is currently active, spreading videos and messages on popular sharing websites. One such video featured AMM or Harakah al-Yaqin's (HaY) leader Hafiz Tohar urging Rohingya Muslims to come out and join the jihad. At this juncture, it is not clear if AMM is just another name or new incarnation for the HaY, and media reports suggest that these two could be the same group using different nomenclature. Speaking in a Bengali–Arabic local dialect, Tohar has issued several statements and propaganda videos highlighting the plights of Rohingya Bengalis and the military excesses of the Myanmar government against the community. The statements are aimed at inviting fellow radicalized Rohingyas, mostly settled in Middle Eastern countries, India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, to join the surge against the Myanmar government.

Various investigations undertaken by groups such as the International Crisis Group (ISG), as well as media investigations—especially by Bangladesh-based



Rohingya refugees

Dhaka Tribune—revealed and corroborated some aspects of the government's claim about AMM's international links and how the newly emerged group is backed by a section of radicalized Rohingya diaspora based in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. According to the ISG report, the group was established after the June–October 2012 riots and sectarian violence. The report also underscores that the militants were trained under the supervision of Rohingya Jihadi veterans with experience fighting in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Interviews with members of HaY revealed that the group was responsible for the series of attacks on Myanmar Border Guard Police outposts in October. In one of the interviews with the *Dhaka Tribune*, the leaders of HaY denied being a terrorist group, as portrayed by the Myanmar government, and said that they would prefer to be called a “revolutionary group waging a movement against the oppression of Rohingya Muslims by the Myanmar government”. HaY's propaganda suggests that they are looking for Islamic legitimacy for their organized violence by seeking out fatwas from senior clerics in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. This would help this fringe group to unite scattered Rohingya militants under one platform.

Subsequent interrogations of captured HaY members have also brought the inner working style of the group to light, as well as details about the plots and details of its core membership. Its leader, Hafiz Tohar, reportedly attended a six-month Taliban training course in Pakistan and visited Myanmar from a village in Bangladesh to organize the armed insurgency. As



Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi

Hatched by IS-affiliated Jemaah Ansar Daulah, this plan to avenge atrocities against the Rohingya was foiled by local police. AQIS has also threatened to avenge the persecution of Rohingyas in Myanmar.

Buddhists Extremists

Criticism levelled at democratic icon and current state counselor Aung San Suu Kyi has mostly been directed at her failure to condemn or control the religious intolerance in the country after her party took power. The Rohingya crisis has brought international condemnation from rights groups, governments, the United Nations, and even the Vatican. Overlooking the nascent militant movement and its violence, world leaders, including several Nobel Peace Prize laureates, have criticized Myanmar's leadership, primarily Suu Kyi, herself a Nobel laureate, for failing to uphold the human rights of Rohingya Muslims. Some have even termed the ongoing state violence ethnic cleansing and a crime against humanity.

Those sympathetic to the Rohingya cause have raised concerns regarding the so-called Buddhist “969” nationalist movement in Myanmar, spearheaded by radical Buddhist monk Ashan Wirathu. Under Wirathu and his organization Ma Ba Tha (loosely trans-

World leaders, including several Nobel Peace Prize laureates, have criticized Myanmar's leadership.

far as training and indoctrination of these AMM or HaY leaders are concerned, investigation reports indicate well-entrenched Pakistani and Bangladeshi links to this latest militant resurgence.

The regional wings of global Jihadist groups such as Islamic State and Al-Qaeda, for instance IS's Khurasan province and Al-Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), have also proclaimed support for Rohingya Muslims and attempted to exploit the situation there. The Islamic State inspired a bomb plot at the Myanmar Embassy in Jakarta in November 2016.



Rohingya village burning in 2012

lated as Patriotic Association of Myanmar), Myanmar's Buddhist nationalists aim to restrict the spread of Islam and fight to protect the country's Buddhist identity. Wirathu's message is directed against Rohingyas, and he and his followers have been accused of inciting violence through religious hate speech with heavy anti-Islamic rhetoric. Though anti-Rohingya sentiment remains high in the Buddhist-majority country, the highest-ranking government-appointed Buddhist clergy, under severe international pressure, banned Wirathu from delivering sermons across the country for one year, starting from March 10,

It is however uncertain whether Wirathu and his Ma Ba Tha group will be silenced by this ban, as they enjoy the patronage of a powerful section in the military, elites from the previous administration, and of course a section of Buddhist nationalists and alarmists who oppose the expansion of Islam in the country.

The Rohingya issue and rising anti-Islamic sentiments are not the only challenge the present government is facing, however. There are other ethnic faultlines the administration has to tackle. A renewed armed insurgency in the North began in November, erupting again with violent force in the early weeks of March in Laukkai, the administrative capital of the

ethnic Kokang region of Shan State. Clashes between the Myanmar army and ethnic rebels, spearheaded by the Northern Alliance, left 30 dead and triggered mass displacement. The Northern Alliance is comprised of four ethnically-aligned armed groups fighting Myanmar forces in northern Shan and Kachin states. This conflict surfaced at a time when Aung San Suu Kyi and her government are attempting to bring all armed factions into the government-sponsored peace process through the signing of a nationwide ceasefire agreement.

With Myanmar's young democratic government facing an uphill battle to manage internal ethnic and armed strife, a growing Rohingya Islamic militancy will only add to the existing miseries amid a clamor against the government for failing to protect its minorities. Any further state apathy towards the stateless Rohingya population will exacerbate the emerging Islamist situation in the region, making the desperate among them easy recruits for global jihadi groups. ■

Animesh Roul is a New-Delhi-based public policy analyst, with specializations in counterterrorism, radical Islam, terror financing, and other issues relating to armed conflict.



India's Left-Wing Extremists

Maoists in the rural areas of India continue to threaten and recruit as they prepare for revolution.

by Animesh Roul



DESPITE THE end of the Cold War, left-wing extremism remains a threat to global stability. Under a Maoist banner, such extremists continue to threaten, murder, and conquer in central India. They are known as the Naxal insurgency, or Naxalites, after the place they emerged, Naxalbari in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal. The left-wing extremist movement has plagued India since the mid-1960s and was once called the greatest threat to the country's internal security. It has declined in recent years, but it has not abated. The Indian Ministry of Home Affairs estimates that in the decade between 2005 and 2015, there have been 4,748 civilians and 1,896 security personnel killed in Naxal-led violence. The majority of the civilians killed were from pro-state tribal populations who face the wrath of Maoists for being "police informers" or "government agents". Government figures from 2016 suggest that from January to November, 196 civilians and 64 security personnel have been killed by the Maoists and their supporters.

At the peak of their insurgency, Indian Maoists

indiscriminately targeted legislators, security force officials, civilians, and infrastructures in their so-called Revolution Zone or Red Corridor, which comprises swathes of territory including parts of central and eastern India. The Maoist extremists once controlled nearly 40,000 sq. km spread across 20 states. Over the last ten years, nearly 70 districts in nine states have been affected by Naxal violence to varying degrees, according to a modest assessment by India's Internal Affairs Ministry. Several more states still unofficially consider themselves a target.

In the decade between 2005 and 2015, there have been 4,748 civilians and 1,896 security personnel killed in Maoist-led violence.

The goal of the Maoists remains to take over the Indian state by armed violence or struggle. Though born in India, their movement was inspired by the revolutionary ideals of Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution that emerged in China during the mid-1960s. Their immediate objectives are to achieve military strength and geographical consolidation to trigger

a revolutionary war against India's security apparatus. They may have recently lost rural support, but they are gaining ground among intellectuals and the Muslim minority population.

The Indian Maoist Revolution

The Naxal insurgency emerged in 1967 under the leadership of Charu Mazumdar and slowly spread to neighboring states, coming a long way from a small-scale local rebellion of peasants and tribal people. It initially centered around the impoverished parts of West Bengal, Bihar, and Andhra Pradesh, but soon after it organized nationally as the Communist Party of India. Most of the political party uses the Marxist-Leninist label (CPI-ML), distinguishing it from the CPI-Maoist groups that have since adopted violent tactics, including fomenting peasant unrest against landlords and guerrilla warfare against the government.

The Maoist groups faltered in the face of relentless military and territorial counter-insurgency offensives by the government, as well as simultaneous development and outreach initiatives in the tribal areas. Combined, these debilitated the Naxal militant forces

and corroded much of its domination over vast swathes of territory. The influence of the CPI-Maoists has decreased to the so-called Red Zones. Even the propaganda machinery of the Maoists has admitted to such losses over the previous few years.

A resolution from the CPI-Maoist's central committee in 2015 noted that this eroding support

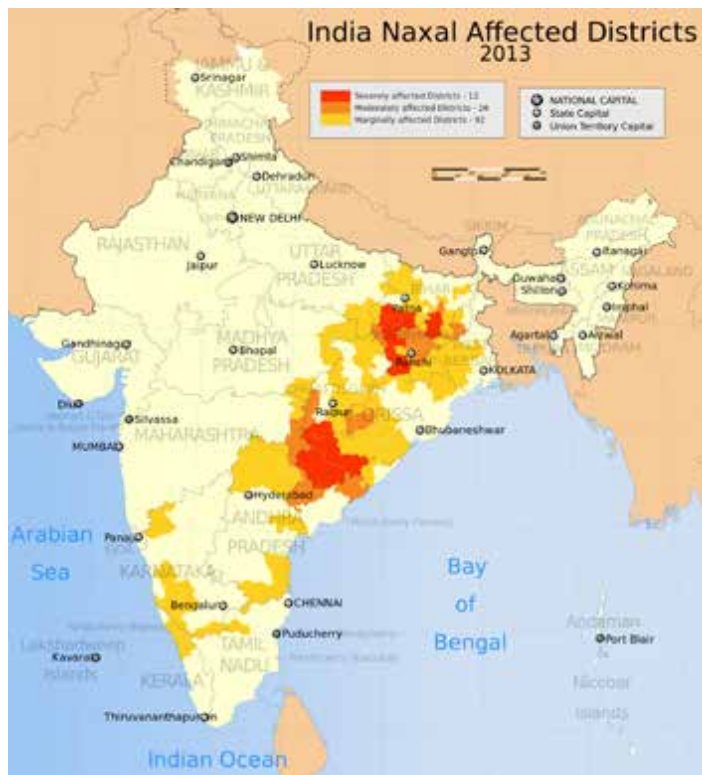
This was the first time that the brutal and inhumane side of the Naxal insurgency was circulated by the organization itself.

base, amid rising rates of surrender and desertion by its cadres, jeopardizes its ability to scout for new talent. The General Secretary of the party, Muppalla Lakshmana Rao—also known by the *nom de guerre* Ganapathy—conceded the loss of a “considerable number of party leaders” and vowed to intensify the campaign to strengthen cadres amid a weakened movement in “rural plains and urban areas”. He aired this in an internally circulated interview for the Maoist Information Bulletin:

“We have lost considerable number of party leaders at all levels starting from the central committee to the village level party committees. Therefore, we have identified the preservation of existing subjective forces from enemy attacks as one of the foremost tasks before the party.”

He even urged Maoists members to carry out “wide propaganda against the present Indian government under Narendra Modi and his Right-wing party’s ‘pro-imperialist and pro-feudal’ policies”. In an April 2015 interview, Ganapathy reiterated Maoist support for ‘Dalits’ (a lower caste of Indians), Muslims, and working classes, with an aim to recreate a support base among them. Since 2007, the CPI-Maoists have purposefully reached out to Muslims and other disaffected minorities to increase the insurgency’s support against the Indian state.

Delhi is taking Ganapathy’s threats seriously. India’s counter-terrorism agency, the National Investigating Agency (NIA), has announced a reward of approximately \$22,000 (US) for any information leading



Maoist-active regions of India

India's Left-Wing Extremists



Naxalite march

to Ganapathy's arrest.

Maoists claim to fight the Indian state for the cause of the economically underprivileged sections of society, mostly tribal people from Central and East Indian states. According to Delhi, however, the tribal populations have become victim of the "protracted people's war". The Indian government's Minister of State for Home Affairs says the Maoist movement is one of the causes of tribal region underdevelopment, as they have hindered work in the areas in order to keep the population away from government-sponsored development projects and welfare schemes. In December 2016, he emphasized that most of the central welfare schemes and skill development programs have failed to reach the tribal villages because of the Maoist presence. The conflict affects the construction of schools, hospitals, roadways, and industry, perpetuating the very inequalities that the Maoists use as justification for their acts.

Violent Acts

The CPI-Maoist initiated a campaign of violence against civilians and state machinery in July 2006, with a mass killings at the Errabore Relief Camp in Chhattisgarh, killing over 30 people. While sporadic low-scale strikes continued, Maoists unleashed another major at-

tack at a police camp in Dantewada, Chhattisgarh, in March 2007, killing 55 people including security personnel. A February 2010 attack against the personnel of the Eastern Frontier Rifles at Silda in West Bengal took 25 lives. In April the same year, armed Maoists killed over 75 security force personnel at Danewada. The most dramatic attack came on May 25, 2013, when they ambushed a convoy of political party members at Bastar, Chhattisgarh, killing 27 people including top legislators of the then-ruling Congress party.

Observers fear that the Maoists are moving away from the traditional guerrilla formula of ambushes towards a novel hit-and-run formula and urban strategy. This strategy of encircling urban areas is reminiscent of violent clashes between security forces and armed tribal groups backed by Naxalites over land acquisition by the state government a decade ago. The same regions have been a hub of Maoist activity since the 1980s. Maoists in these areas have raised armed rebellion against the local government officials, forest officials, contractors and political forces—but left-wing extremism is not just a rural movement.

A significant shift occurred in 2004, with the calculated merger of the two biggest Maoists formations, the Peoples War Group (PWG) and the MCCI (Maoist Communist Centre of India), to form a unified

CPI-Maoist. Fusing not only their ideology but the firepower and manpower of these two armed groups, the merger strengthened the insurgency enough to challenge the Indian state and its sovereignty.

Many active members and sympathizers have been arrested in Indian metropolises, including New Delhi, Mumbai, Nagpur, and Hyderabad. As Maoist violence declined, they garnered increased urban support from intellectuals, students, slum dwellers, minority populations, and laborers in the cities and towns. The Maoists have attempted to infiltrate existing trade unions and create new ones in big companies both for political and funding purposes. Universities across the country have witnessed a wave of sympathy for the cause of tribal and Maoist struggle. Previously, the CPI-Maoists had never achieved success in infiltrating India's urban centers.

Linkages with Other Maoist Movements

Maoists in India and elsewhere in South Asia, like neighboring Nepal, have adopted the strategy of a "protracted people's war" to achieve their political objectives. This concept has three phases: occupy the land, step up the guerrilla struggle, and bring power to the people. For a while, India's Maoists maintained ideological-level links with their Nepalese counterpart, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist-Centre). Maoists in both countries, as well as in Bangladesh, were believed to be linked through a pan-South Asian conglomerate known as the Coordination Committee of Maoist Parties and Organisations of South Asia (CCOMPOSA). The March 2004 Conference of CCOMPOSA adopted a political resolution that was signed by Maoist groups from all three countries. The 4th CCOMPOSA Conference, in August 2006, adopted a resolution stating that members of the conglomerate vowed to remove "reactionary rulers, the Indian Expansionists, the U.S., and all imperialists out of South Asia".

Accusations of strategic or operational links to on-the-ground militia, however, are always refuted by Nepalese as well as Indian Maoists. National Maoist organizations, as in China and the Philippines, have often distanced themselves from reports of guerrilla warfare.

The Nepalese Maoists joined the mainstream political path for social change and abandoned a decade-long bloody insurgency after signing a peace deal in 2006. It is unlikely the underground and covert Indian Maoist movement has strong international connections, but there are suspicions that an underground

faction of Nepalese Maoists continues its fraternal linkages with its Indian counterpart.

Islamist Links

CPI-Maoist General Secretary Ganapathy's call for Muslims and other minority communities to support the insurgency aroused suspicions within the security establishment of India. Ganapathy has previously expressed solidarity with Islamic jihadist movements, describing them as a reaction to U.S. imperialist policies, exploitation, and suppression of the oil-rich Arabic nations. According to him, CPI-Maoist opposes every attack on Arab and Muslim countries and the Muslim community at large committed in the name of the global war on terror.

Borrowing a strategy from ISIS, Maoists circulated a video in August of last year featuring a mid-2009 ambush on a security force convoy in Madanwada, Chhattisgarh. Nearly 20 security personnel were killed including a senior police official. The video showed torture, killings, and the Islamic jihadist-style execution of one wounded officer. This was the first time that

The immediate aim and objectives of both these anti-democracy groups coincide.

the brutal and inhumane side of the Naxal insurgency, though not previously unheard of, was circulated by the organization itself. The purpose of releasing this video was not clear, but its timing suggests it was released to either compete with or show solidarity for jihadist recruitment in India and abroad.

During the NIA's investigations into ISIS-affiliated outreach efforts inside India in July of last year, the agency reportedly found hints of a possible link between an ISIS module in India and the Maoists. The ISIS affiliates were mostly Indian Mujahideen (IM) militants looking for ammunition and hideouts, but they included jihadi personality Mudabbir Mushtaq Shaikh, the leader of ISIS's branch in India. The attempts to establish links with Maoists were initiated by these former IM militants, though there are no clues whether Maoists have so far accepted the offer of logistical ties, including training and weapons trading. According to unverified NIA reports, the former IM militants met with senior Maoist leaders in April/May of last year. There is fear that the so-called "Red Corridor" of the Maoists could become a training ground for Islamic militants. This has been at the core of investi-

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gations by India's security forces and has featured in parliamentary debate since the Intelligence Agency of Pakistan attempted to infiltrate Maoist ranks over the last decade.

Indian Maoists have supported Islamists in Kashmir and Manipur and at one time openly supported their respective movements in these two states through leaflets and propaganda.

Despite this, it seems unlikely that the Maoists will be joining hands with ISIS or like-minded jihadi groups (e.g. Al Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent) any time soon, as it would lead to a loss of credibility for the movement. However, there is an increasing chance of tactical linkages, as the immediate aim and objectives of both these anti-democracy groups coincide. Always short of funds to sustain the Red Movement, the Maoist leadership could take this as an opportunity to engage with these elements for financial benefits.

Maoists Today

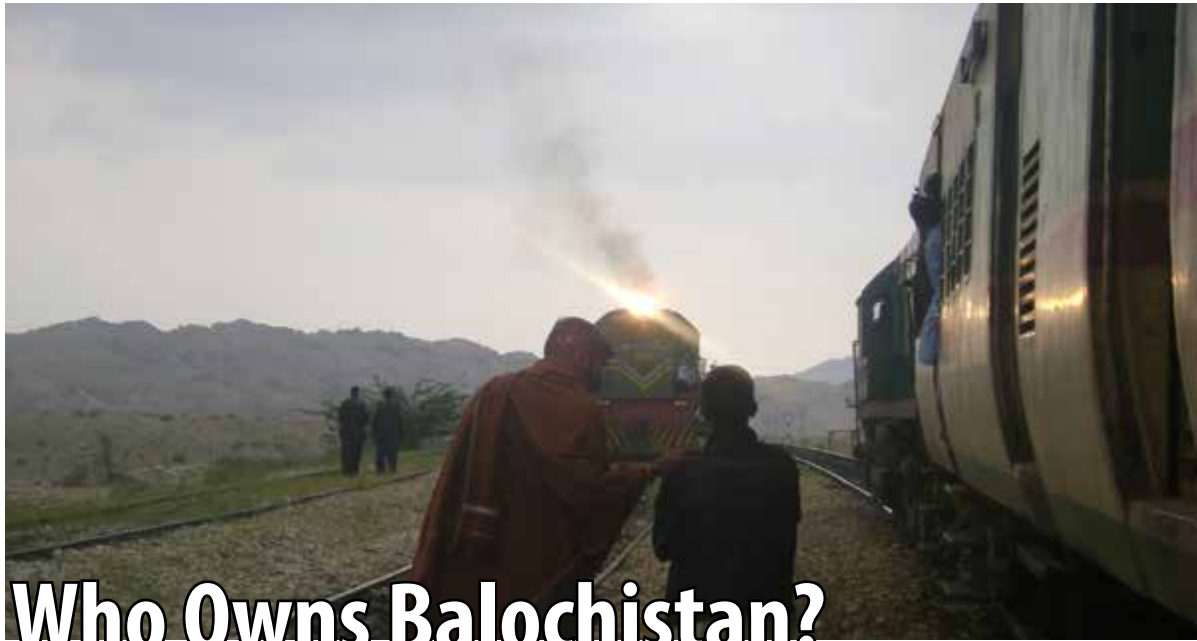
Despite their recent setbacks, the Maoist stronghold in Chhattisgarh's Abhujmarh area, the epicenter of their "liberated zone", remains intact and undis-

turbed. Here the CPI-Maoist and its military wing, the People's Liberation Guerrilla Army, have been running a parallel government for over a decade, in a region with a shortage of civil administration.

Amid all the signs of setbacks and the waning of the revolution, the CPI-Maoist's central committee issued a list of celebrations in 2017 and 2018: the 50th anniversary of the Naxalbari armed insurgency, the centenary of the Russian Bolshevik revolution, and the bicentenary of the birth of Karl Marx. This multi-decade old insurgency movement has faced many reversals due to concerted government military campaigns and economic maneuvers to stifle its growth, but it has clearly not given up. The upcoming anniversaries provide a convenient pretext to try to bolster its strength. Despite its marked decline in firepower and a significant degeneration of cadre strengths, any miscalculation or underestimation of Maoist resolve would be detrimental to India's internal security architecture. ■

Animesh Roul is a New Delhi-based public policy analyst, with specializations in counterterrorism, radical Islam, terror financing, and other issues relating to armed conflict.





Who Owns Balochistan?

India may be trying to play Balochistan as a thorn in Pakistan's side.

by Animesh Roul



THE AGE-OLD India-Pakistan rivalry is reaching new heights over another contested territory. This time, the tug of war is over the conflict-ridden region of Balochistan—the largest, resource-rich, and yet most sparsely populated province of Pakistan.

Ever since Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi criticized the state of human rights violations in Balochistan during his Independence Day speech this August, the province has become a major point of contention between the two countries, as Pakistan's poor human rights credentials were highlighted in world forums.

A couple of days earlier, at an all-party meeting on Jammu and Kashmir, Modi also raised the issue of Pakistan's atrocities against the people of Balochistan and Pakistan-administered Kashmir (PAK). It comes at a time when India would rather shift the spotlight off its own record in the Indian-administered sections of Kashmir. (See the article "The Kashmiri Faultline" in this issue.) Modi raised the stakes even higher by suggesting that PAK belonged to the Indian-administered regions.

Even India's representative to the United Nations made a point of discussing Pakistan's grave human

rights violations in Balochistan and elsewhere in Pakistan, including Gilgit and PAK.

Some regional observers believe that the sudden shift in India's Pakistan policy is directed at striking a balance, or, in other words, countering Pakistan's concerted propaganda against India over Jammu and Kashmir. India would rather been seen to be expressing humanitarian concerns for a people oppressed in a garrison state rather than meddling in Pakistan's internal affairs. The plight of the people of Balochistan, including systemic genocide, mass killings, and disappearances, needs highlighting, but the timing is interesting for India.

The plight of the people of Balochistan needs highlighting, but the timing is interesting for India.

Nonetheless, India's decision to raise the issue has been largely welcomed by Baloch nationalists, especially the diaspora and exiled peoples. The chairman of the Baloch National Movement, Khalil Baloch, called Modi's statement on Balochistan "a positive development", and lamented the prevalent "policy of indiffer-

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ence adopted by the international community towards Pakistan's war crimes in occupied Balochistan that include both ethnic cleansing and genocide." Those who voice support for Modi's speech inside Pakistan, however, risk government retribution.

Tracing the Conflict

Pakistan perceives Balochistan's freedom struggle as terrorism against the country and a threat to its territorial integrity. The Baloch nationalists see the Pakistan government and military as an occupying force and exploiter of economic resources. Strong anti-Pakistan sentiments arose in the dominant Baloch tribes—especially the Bugtis, Marri, and Mengals—in the late 1990s.

The origin of the Balochistan crisis, however, can be traced to 1947, when one of the princely states, Kalat, refused to join Pakistan under the British arrangement. The forceful annexation of Balochistan ended the immediate crisis but began another. A decade later, several tribes resorted to armed resistance and guerrilla warfare against Pakistan's 'One Unit' policy, which merged Balochistan, the North West Frontier Province, Punjab, and Sindh into a single administrative unit as known as West Pakistan, thereby curtailing the power of tribal leaders. Following a quiet period, Baloch nationalists again consolidated to resist Pakistan's dominance and extraction of mineral resources, resulting in a bloody insurgency movement which lasted until 1969 and was followed by a truce agreement that recognized Balochistan as the fourth province of Pakistan. In early 1970s, another crisis erupted when then-



Balochistan within Pakistan

President of Pakistan Zulfikar Ali Bhutto dismissed the provincial government of Balochistan and imposed martial law. This led to the formation of armed militant groups such as the Khair Baksh Marri-led Balochistan People's Liberation Front, which spearheaded the armed insurgency in Balochistan and fought with the Pakistani army in the battle of Chamalang in 1974. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, however, the province remained relatively calm and consolidated under Islamabad administration.

The current phase of crisis dates back to 2003-04, when waves of armed insurgencies were reported in Balochistan, led by two Baloch nationalist leaders, Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti and Mir Baloch Marri, representing the Bugti and Marri tribes respectively.



Quetta, capital of Balochistan

The situation reached serious proportions as the militant Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) stepped up attacks against Pakistani security forces and power plants across the province. In retaliation, the Pakistani army unleashed a major offensive against the Bugti and Marri tribes. The BLA's argument for resorting to violence against Pakistani troops was primarily the exploitation of resources and military excesses in the province.

The Baloch militant nationalist leaders renewed the decades-old Baloch struggle, demanding greater control of natural resources and urged the regime of Pervez Musharraf to suspend the construction of military bases in 2005. Subsequent assassination attempts on Musharraf in mid-December that year prompted a massive military crackdown on Baloch nationalists, ultimately leading to the deaths of Akbar Bugti in 2006 and of Baloch Marri in 2007.

The deaths of Bugti and Marri were followed by the unlawful detention and disappearance of many Baloch leaders. The response of the Pakistani army was seen as heavy-handed and further fueled the Baloch nationalist movement. Militants carried out retributive attacks on Pakistan security forces, on gas pipelines, and on power grids. Apart from the BLA, other groups have carried forward the armed resistance against Pakistan, including the Baloch Republican Army (BRA) and the Baloch Liberation Front.

Enter India

At a 2009 bilateral meeting between India and Pakistan in Egypt, Pakistan complained about India's meddling in its internal affairs in Balochistan. India had long kept silent on any involvement until India's external affairs spokesperson indirectly admitted in 2015 to having given refuge to people from Balochistan who had been persecuted by Pakistan. One such refugee, Baloch Pardili, a representative of the Baloch Liberation Front, has been staying in India since 2009, gathering support on behalf of his leader, Hyrbyair Marri.

Islamabad has blamed India for supporting the Baloch insurgents, including those who have fled to Afghanistan and then moved to European and American cities. Pro-freedom Baloch leaders such as Hyrbyair Marri, Brahmdagh Bugti, and Javed Mengal are liv-



Indian P.M. Narendra Modi and Pakistani P.M. Nawaz Sharif

ing in exile after long spearheading the freedom movement at home. Marri has lived in London since the late 1990s. Bugti, the current leader of the Baloch Republican Party, at first lived in exile in Afghanistan, and since 2006 has lived in Geneva, following the death of his grandfather, the leader of the powerful Bugti tribe. He is now seeking political asylum in India. The support India has allegedly given to leaders like Marri and Bugti are at the center of Pakistan's criticism of India.

If India grants asylum to Brahmdagh Bugti, the tension between India and Pakistan will climb, increasing the seriousness of India's Balochistan policy.

India's overt interest, especially in Balochistan and other areas such as Gilgit-Baltistan and PAK, has touched another nerve. Balochistan is important for China, which is keen to build its China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), part of its ambitious "One Belt, One Road" project that aims to eventually connect China with Central Asian and European nations through Pakistan. A 2,000 km road and rail infrastructure worth billions will connect China's largest province, Xinjiang, with Pakistan's Gwadar port in Balochistan. (See article "Can China Curb Terrorism?" in this issue.)

This project fuels Baloch resentment, as it typifies Pakistan and China's exploitation of Balochistan's re-

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Gwadar Port

sources, such as oil and gas, and Pakistan's China-aided oppression of the province's people. By taking the side of the Baloch people, a move seen as demonstrating opposition to CPEC, India has sent a clear message to both Pakistan and China about its intention to uphold the rights of Balochistan's populace. The Indian Prime Minister again raised his supposedly humanitarian concerns over the \$46 billion project at a bilateral meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the G-20 summit in Hangzhou, China in early September.

Pakistan, meanwhile, has declared that India is attempting to sabotage CPEC by fueling anti-Pakistan sentiments in Balochistan. Certainly, a free Balochistan would be a major hurdle for the ever-expanding influence of China towards the Indian Ocean.

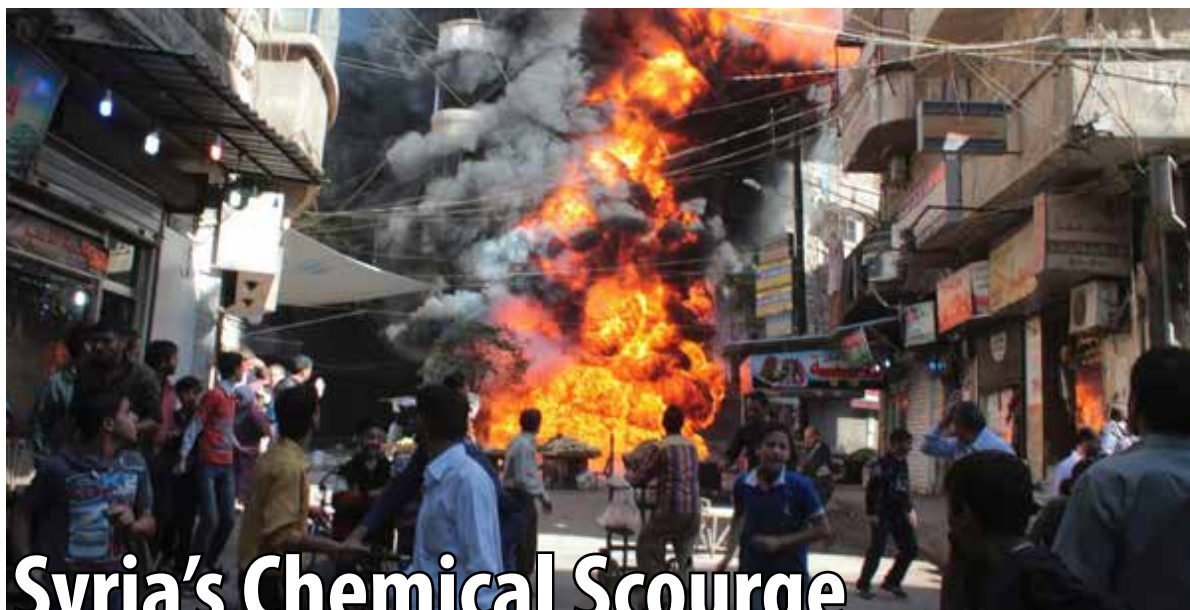
In reality, India has little ability to intervene directly in the affairs of Balochistan, the way it did during the Bangladeshi freedom struggle of the early 1970s. India shares neither a border nor a common peoples with Balochistan, as it does with Bangladesh. Without direct access it would be difficult to make any interventions, whether humanitarian or otherwise. The only thing India can do is rake up the matter of human rights in international forums. If India wishes to seriously take up the Baloch cause, it would need the help of other regional players, like Iran and Afghanistan. Any unilateral action against Pakistan, be it diplomatic isolation or military intervention, would prove largely futile.

The other stakeholders, including China and the United States, would not want to see any Indian intervention or meddling in Pakistani internal affairs. Nevertheless, India's vocal and moral support has given renewed motivation to Baloch nationalist leaders and followers at home. Just as Pakistan is demanding a referendum in the Indian-administered state of Jammu and Kashmir, Balochistan leaders, allegedly at the behest of India, are calling for an internationally supervised referendum to find a solution to the decades-old insurgency.

Although India's policy shift on Balochistan is still a work in progress, it is amply clear that India would not hesitate to encourage Baloch nationalist leaders to strive for sovereignty in their own country. India may be mostly impotent in the matter, but it has nonetheless spoken out on Balochistan's behalf, unnecessarily worsening its relationship with its northern neighbor. Ignoring the humanitarian cause and looking at what India stands to gain suggests that India is likely trying to up the ante in its geopolitical rivalry with Pakistan over the Kashmir region.

Irrespective of what India chooses to do next, the situation in Balochistan is already escalating. ■

Animesh Roul is a New-Delhi-based public policy analyst, with specializations in counterterrorism, radical Islam, terror financing, and other issues relating to armed conflict.



Syria's Chemical Scourge

The use of horrendous chemical weapons is on the rise in Syria and Iraq, but where are they coming from?

by Animesh Roul



THE TERRIBLE odor of chlorine gas drifts on the wind in the Syrian city of Aleppo. On April 7, four civilians were poisoned by this unpredictable and indiscriminate weapon, reportedly used by Islamist rebels against Kurdish fighters in the neighborhood of Sheikh Maqsoud.

Ever since Bashar al-Assad's alleged use of chemical weapons in the Ghouta suburb of Damascus killed upwards of 1,700 people in 2013, the terrible, chaotic nature of weaponized gas has become representative of the chaos of the conflict itself. When the winds switch direction, chemical weapons kill combatants and civilians alike, and in the chlorine-scented fog of war, all sides can—and do—claim that others fired the imprecise weapons. The use of chemical weapons is a war crime that demands investigation, but in the multi-faction Syrian and Iraqi theater of war, reports conflict as to who is using the weapons and from where they're being acquired. Illegal Weapons

Chemical weapons were banned over 90 years ago, in part because of their unpredictability, but also be-

cause of the terrible agony the weapons inflict not only on those who die, sometimes after hours of pain, but also on survivors, who can suffer from disabilities for the remainder of their lives.

The Ghouta incident, infamously labeled as 'Syria's Srebrenica' (in reference to the July 1995 massacre during the Bosnian War) put immense pressure on the Syrian regime to declare and dismantle its chemical weapons stockpiles. Later in 2013, Syria acceded to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and began dismantling its declared chemical weapons under the process established by U.N. Security Council Resolution 2118.

When the winds switch direction, chemical weapons kill combatants and civilians alike.

Even though international pressure in the aftermath of Ghouta led to the peaceful destruction of Syria's stockpiles, especially of nerve gas and mustard agents, the use of some chemical agents, like chlorine gas, continued, mostly around the rebel-held territories.

The use of chlorine as a weapon of war, whether



A barrel bomb exploding in Daraa, Syria

directed against civilians or combatants, is in complete violation of the 1925 Geneva Protocol, which Syria had ratified. The Geneva Protocol prohibits the “Use in War of Asphyxiating, Poisonous or other Gases”, which certainly include chlorine. Despite this, the United Nations and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), the implementing body of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), have recently confirmed the indiscriminate use of chlorine gas and other chemical weapons against civilians in Syria. A host of independent agencies and other sources, including the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and the Syrian American Medical Society, have verified that there were indeed victims of such attacks. In 2015, the U.N. Security Council passed a resolution condemning the use of chlorine as a chemical weapon in the country and clearly stated that such a violation would have consequences under Chapter VII of the U.N. Charter.

In the last few years, the blatant use of chemical weapons in the Syrian conflict has been reported over and over. Some of these incidents have been investigated and confirmed by leading world agencies, but many others cases remain under-reported and controversial, and the source of the chemical weapons remains hard to pin down.

Attack after Attack

According to anecdotal evidence, the first use of chemical strikes in Syria was in October, 2012 in Salqin, Idlib province. In December of that year, reports emerged from the city of Homs, where the Free Syrian Army rebels accused the Assad government of using

gaseous substances. Even though there were inconsistencies in the reports of these incidents, evidence surfaced later that a chemical weapon known as ‘Agent 15’ was used in Homs. This incident brought international attention to the possibility of further use of chemical weapons in Syria.

The frequency of chemical weapon attacks escalated from March, 2013, particularly in places around Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs. The March 19, 2013 chemical attacks on the Khan al-Assel neighborhood of Aleppo and al-Atebeh suburb of Damascus left at least 25 people dead and many more injured. These attacks were blamed on the Syrian opposition forces fighting against Assad’s regime. The events triggered an international outcry and investigations were undertaken under the auspices of the United Nations and other world bodies like the World Health Organization and the OPCW.

Subsequent chemical attacks were reported in other Syrian cities, including Adra on March 23, where phosphorus bombs killed two and injured over 20 civilians. In April, similar attacks occurred in Aleppo, Saraqeb, and Jobar. However, the most deadly strike took place on August 21, 2013, when rockets filled with sarin gas were launched in Ghouta, killing up to 1,700 people and affecting many more. The incident remained clouded in the fog of war as the Syrian government traded blame with rebel forces over who was responsible. Assad’s government refused to allow a U.N. inspection team access to the site, though it was already in the country.

The U.N. and Russia led separate investigations and confirmed the use of the sarin nerve agent and chlorine in previous chemical attacks. Even though

Syria's Chemical Scourge

various investigations zeroed on the use of sarin in Ein Tarma, Moadamiyah, Irbin, Dumma, Zamalka, and later Ghouta, they could not ascertain the perpetrators of the attacks: whether it was the Assad government or rebel militant groups.

In Ghouta, the rebels insisted that Assad's forces had launched the weapon, which hit them. Assad hindered investigators' efforts to reach the site and, with Russia's backing, insisted that the rebels had fired on themselves in order to blame the government and draw international support. Though Western analysts suspected the Assad regime at the time, later investigation into the range of the missile and the position of Assad's troops still could not provide proof of who was responsible. Assad nonetheless relented under international pressure and dismantled his stockpile of chemical weapons. Importantly, the Syrian regime did not declare its stores of chlorine as a weapon.

Despite Assad's supposed acquiescence to their suppression, however, the use of chemical weapons continued in Syria. Between April and May 2014, a number of cases of chlorine gas attacks emerged from the Hama and Idlib governorates in northern Syria, as did accusations and counter-accusations between government and opposition forces. The Kafr Zita chlo-

rine gas incidents on April 11, 2014 reportedly killed at least three people and affected over 100. While the government blamed the Al-Qaeda-linked Al-Nusra Front for using the gas against civilians, the opposition rebels pointed fingers at government-dropped barrel bombs, which can be loaded with chemical agents.

Even though international pressure in the aftermath led to the peaceful destruction of Syria's stockpiles, the use of some chemical agents continued.

The last reported chlorine-filled barrel bomb strikes, which continued until late May 2014, targeted the northern Syrian villages of Al-Tamanah and Al-Lataminah. The OPCW fact-finding mission (FFM) confirmed the use of chlorine in these villages. July and August then saw intermittent chlorine attacks in the suburbs of Hama, Aleppo, and Damascus.

The use of chemical agents was sporadic throughout 2014, but the succeeding year witnessed a spurt of such incidents, bringing the specter of chemical weapons back to haunt the inhabitants of Syria. Sarmin, in the northwest, was targeted in March 2015. This town is a stronghold of Islamists forces like Ahrar al-Sham and Jund al-Aqsa. Nearly six people died in the incident and as many as 30 people were affected with

moderate or severe symptoms.

Here too, allegations and counter-allegations flew regarding this incident, as opposition groups claimed that Bashar al-Assad's government carried out the attack and the Syrian regime denied doing so. The subsequent months saw similar strikes in the governorates of Al-Hassakah, Aleppo, and Idlib, affecting scores of civilians.

Though it is difficult to definitively identify the perpetrators of chemi-



A Syrian soldier practising for chemical weapons in 2010



Chlorine gas in Iraq

cal attacks in the complex, multi-faction Syrian civil war, many have been attributed to the government of Bashar al-Assad. Nonetheless, it is becoming clear from recent events that the hardliner Islamist groups active in the region—including neighboring Iraq—are increasingly turning to chemical agents as weapons against their targets.

It is widely known that the previous regime in Iraq and the present Syrian government included stockpiles of chemical weapons in their military arsenals. It is unknown, however, whether or not these state-controlled arsenals have fallen into the hands of rebel factions like the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Al-Nusra Front, or other militant factions like Jaish al-Islam. Reports of substantial territorial gains that ISIS has made in both Syria and Iraq has provoked fears that they may have gained access to the remnants of chemical weapons infrastructure and stockpiles. In March, the United States led airstrikes to destroy two chemical facilities near Mosul, Iraq, which were under ISIS's control.

Both Iraqi and U.S. intelligence officials have claimed that ISIS is aggressively pursuing the development of chemical weapons. ISIS is said to have taken control of Mosul University's chemistry laboratory for some months in order to develop a new generation of explosive devices, including chemical weapons, as reported by sources in the *Wall Street Journal*.

This is not mere speculations. The Iraq and Syrian war theater has witnessed an increasing use of chemi-

cal weapons such as chlorine and mustard gas against civilians and military targets alike. There is a potential risk ISIS could smuggle the chemical weapons out of the country for an attack elsewhere.

Many of the chemical events in 2015 were attributed or linked to non-state actors, especially ISIS, with chlorine the most commonly used in Aleppo, Damascus suburbs, and Deir Ezzour. In late June, ISIS reportedly used unidentified chemical agents against Kurdish fighters affiliated with the Kurdish People's Protection Units in Al-Hasaka and Tel Brak in northeastern Syria. For a week, beginning on August 21, ISIS forces used sulfur mustard gas in an attack on the town of

The source of the chemical weapons remains hard to pin down.

Mare'e, to the north of Aleppo. Independent sources, such as Conflict Armament Research and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, verified that ISIS used chemical weapons several times against Kurdish forces in 2015.

The claim from within ISIS that it is in possession of chemical weapons such as mustard agents came in late August from a Dutch soldier turned ISIS fighter, identified as Omar Yilmaz, who indicated that the group has acquired chemical weapons once belonging

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Bashar al-Assad meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin

to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Yilmaz's revelations came in tandem with a series of suspected incidents of mustard gas attacks in northern Iraq and Syria.

Taking Responsibility

After a short period of quiescence, chemical weapons reappeared in the Syrian theater of war this April, and the finger of suspicion is now pointed at

chlorine gas, remains intact.

The statistics on chemical weapon use in the Syrian war are as frightening as the weapons themselves. From the beginning of the civil war in 2012 to the end of 2015, there were approximately 161 instances of chemical weapons being used, according to the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS). These events have killed 1,491 people, with another 14,581 left injured, according to a SAMS report published in February. The report, however, excluded at least 133 suspected chemical attacks which could not be substantiated through investigations by medical personnel.

A case can be built to suspect that the Bashar al-Assad

regime has retained some chemical weapons for use against its many current and potential future enemies. This reason alone may have emboldened non-state actors such as ISIS to acquire and use chemical weapons, whether against al-Assad or rival targets in war-torn Syria. It is also possible that pilfered chemical weapons from the arsenals of the Assad regime could have reached its opponents, including the Islamic jihadi forces. If ISIS possesses chemical

weapons in Syria, they are an even greater threat to the broader region. Certainly, there are unanswered questions about ISIS's capability to unleash large-scale chemical weapon attacks beyond Syria and Iraq, but

The hardliner Islamist groups active in the region are increasingly turning to chemical weapons.

Islamist groups such as ISIS and Jaish al-Islam. ISIS forces were accused of using mustard gas against the Syrian army during an offensive in the eastern province of Deir Ezzour, which connects Syria to ISIS's major stronghold of Raqqa. A few days later, the Jaish al-Islam militant group fighting government forces in Syria admitted to using chemical agents against Kurdish forces in Aleppo on April 7.

Even though Syria has adhered to the international norms banning chemical weapons, joined the OPCW, and subsequently destroyed its chemical weapons under international supervision, it is feared that a portion of its arsenal, particularly

if the group finds a way to use chemical weapons against their enemies abroad, it will.

ISIS must be stopped, and Assad must reflect on his tactics. The government's continuing stockpiling and alleged use of chlorine gas is not only inhumane, but provides its adversaries with an excuse to employ the same tactics, and it jeopardizes thousands more if the government's chemical weapons are seized by forces like ISIS. ■

Mr. Roul is a New-Delhi-based public policy analyst, with specializations in counterterrorism, radical Islam, terror financing, and other issues relating to armed conflict.



The Social Jihad

ISIS's use of social media may be the greater danger

by Animesh Roul

THE ACCUSATION that ISIS is attempting to set up a “medieval-era” caliphate vastly underestimates the modernity of the threat the organization poses. With its digital outreach efforts, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is a whole new entity. Along with its military advances within the Iraq and Syrian hinterlands, ISIS has stretched its virtual footprint beyond its territory through robust online media management and operations. It seeks to reach a wider audience with regular Islamic discourse and propaganda. By exploiting all available web outlets and forums, ISIS has managed to penetrate online social media, blogging, and publishing platforms to communicate and spread its message across the world, and it has succeeded in inspiring many individuals and groups towards its cause, without necessarily leaving any trace of contact.

Reports released in 2015 estimated that between 27,000 and 31,000 foreigners from 86 countries have been recruited to the Syrian war theatre, 70 percent of whom have joined the ranks of ISIS. While the Muslim nations of the Arabian and Sub-Saharan region contributed the highest number of fighters, European countries like France, England, and Belgium have also been major sources of foreign fighters for Jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq.

The Islamic State, however, is not only scouting

talent for its fighting force and day-to-day governance and services within its caliphate: it is intent on spreading its message of hate around the world. While the number of recruits who have crossed international borders can be estimated, it is completely unknown how many more online followers have become sympathetic to ISIS at home. How is ISIS managing this recruitment? How successful have they been? And how can they be stopped?

The Islamic State is not only scouting talent for its fighting force: it is intent on spreading its message of hate.

The Virtual Jihadi Sphere

By and large, ISIS and other jihadi terrorist groups use Internet social media for four broad reasons: recruitment, propaganda, fundraising, and strategic/encrypted communications. The first three are interconnected. In addition to dedicated websites and jihadi periodicals, like *Dabiq Magazine*, ISIS operates social media accounts as a means of direct communica-

The Social Jihad

tion with sympathizers. The Islamic State had favored public messages on Twitter, where it can quickly share its views around the world, but Twitter has silenced those accounts when it has found them. The company announced in February that it has shut down 125,000 accounts with alleged connection to Islamic extremists, like ISIS and al-Qaeda, since mid-2015.

Both ISIS and governments worldwide would like to know what causes troubled youth to join ISIS.

In order to stay ahead, ISIS has exploited every available online platform: Telegram, Friendica, Quitter, Diaspora, blogging platforms like Wordpress, the self-publishing site Justpaste.it, and messaging platforms like WhatsApp, Viper, and Mixlr. These Internet-based applications enable users both to send private content and to broadcast live audio, text, images, and even video clips to other smartphones. All these technologies have been used by ISIS to connect with and solicit recruits for its cause in Iraq and Syria and abroad, and as companies like Facebook and Twitter crack down on this, there are fears that IS is attempting to create its own messaging and video sharing applications. To date, they have had little success.

The main strategic question, the answer to which both ISIS and governments worldwide would like to know, is what causes troubled youth to join ISIS. What causes radicalization? It is often assumed that violence breeds radicalization, as in the case of the Islamic State arising out of the Iraq conflict, but that is not the case with its recruitment strategies. ISIS has drawn sympathizers from many peaceful nations.

The answer is multifarious. The two Arabic nations with the highest per-capita number of defectors joining armed forces in Syria, leading by an almost triple margin, all have predominantly Sunni populations, which is the same sect of Islam as that professed by ISIS. These nations are Jordan, at 315 fighters per million inhabitants, and Tunisia, at 280, according to estimates from the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization. The same is true for the three European countries with the most recruits: the Muslim populations of Belgium, Sweden, and Denmark, with 46, 32, and 27 recruited fighters per million inhabitants

respectively, are largely Sunni. However, while ISIS and other armed Sunni groups fighting against Syria's Bashir al-Assad obviously draw sympathizers along sectarian lines, this is not the only factor influencing radicalization. Spain, like Denmark, is 4 percent Muslim, the majority of whom are Sunni, but per capita, it has supplied only a tenth the number of the foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria that Denmark has.

Even these kinds of statistics denote only the larger trends. ISIS has succeeded in recruiting fighters from nearly every nation, regardless of the size of its Sunni population. It is estimated that more than 250 Americans have gone to the region to join one or the other side of the conflict. That is less than a fiftieth of the number from Belgium per capita, but a more frightening question is how many have been radicalized but remain at home. While ISIS needs large numbers of recruits to support its caliphate in conventional military tactics on the ground, it does not need large numbers to strike in foreign nations. The numbers of recruits from Belgium demonstrate that the country was at higher risk of homegrown terrorist attacks



A page from ISIS' sDabiq Magazine

than others, as was proven all too clearly this March, but perhaps the more terrifying takeaway from that tragedy was the reminder that it takes only a handful of jihadists to orchestrate such attacks—and it is through social media that ISIS reaches out to disenfranchised youth and troubled individuals in foreign countries to encourage domestic attacks.

It is naive to conclude that radicalization happens simply by surfing or browsing jihadi propaganda on websites; however, ease of access certainly facilitates and creates opportunities for virtual social interactions, the sharing of details of sufferings of Muslims at the hands of others, anecdotal stories of battlefield heroism, and other suchlike details that can influence already discontented minds. These exchanges create a bond or affinity and ultimately unite like-minded sympathizers within the so-called virtual jihadi sphere. It is through this means that ISIS extends its reach across every border to every country.

The Indian Case

In the face of this vast recruitment scheme, approximately only 25 Indian nationals have so far joined ISIS, according to government figures. A similar number have been arrested for varying levels of connection with the Islamic State. The number seems negligible compared to the 400-500 recruits from neighboring Pakistan or when put against India's 172 million-strong Muslim population, the majority of whom are Sunni. The numbers reveal that the vast majority of Indian Muslims have rejected the extremist ideals of ISIS and al-Qaeda.

It is because of this fact, however, that the Islamic State's recruiting strategy in India must use social media, that disgruntled youths look for a violent outlet not at their mosques but online, and that in India, ISIS is not preaching to the choir but trying to find converts. This social media strategy is having its effect: the number of recruits and sympathizers are rising in India and around the world. The continuous online propaganda is succeeding, and jihadi groups have found traction with some Indian Muslim youths. Why this is happening must be understood if it is to be countered. The cases of those who have been arrested for supporting or trying to join ISIS in India reveal a great deal about the Islamic State's recruitment strategies in peaceful foreign nations.

In January, Maharashtra State police and forces from the central investigating agencies unearthed a network of ISIS-influenced extremists; 14 were arrested. They had been sent funds by a suspected ISIS affiliate to carry out a bombing in India.

Nationwide alerts and search and sweep operations were triggered by these arrests. The police claim that these suspects are part of "Junud-ul-khalifa-al-Hind" or the Army of the Caliph of India. With the arrest of its leader, Muddabir Mushtaq Sheikh, the Islamic State's emerging position and its systematic recruitment process using Internet and its applications in India came to the fore. But it was not the first time ISIS influence had reached India.

The Indian authorities have blocked over 90 websites with suspected links with ISIS and other radical Islamic groups. The list of blocked sites includes web portals that are used to spread ISIS propaganda in order to radicalize the Indian populace. The pervasive use of the Internet in fact serves as a medium of virtual *da'wah*, the proselytizing of Islam. This widespread use of the Internet and social media by jihadi groups in the region was first revealed after a number of high-profile arrests from 2014 to 2015, including four engineering students from Kalyan, the Islamic State sympathizer and recruiter Afsha Jabeen, and Mehdi Biswas, who had been running a pro-ISIS Twitter account (@ShamiWitness).

ISIS needs large numbers to support its caliphate on the ground; it does not need large numbers to strike at foreign nations.

The latter, a 24-year-old electrical engineer who allegedly used Twitter for incitement and propaganda targeting Muslim youths, had nearly 16,000 followers before he was arrested at his apartment in December, 2014. He posted and circulated an estimated 122,203 pro-Islamic State messages and web links depicting beheading videos and other messages from the battlefields in Iraq and Syria.

Other youths had gone through many non-violent *da'wah* groups and online chat forums before their recruitment into the ISIS rank and file. If the confessional statement of Areeb Majeed, the only recruit from the Syrian war to have returned to India, is to be believed, the Internet served as a trigger and facilitated his and his companions' journey to the front in June 2014. He had been radicalized well before this trip, joining jihadi chat rooms after first reading jihadi literature and listening to hate-promoting speakers who are widely condemned in India. After watching online videos about ISIS and jihad, he connected with ISIS sympathizers from across the world, in Australia, Tur-



The pro-ISIS ShamiWitness Twitter account

key, Saudi Arabia, America, and elsewhere. Ultimately he, along with two friends, traveled to the Iraq and Syrian war theatres.

The Afsha Jabeen case provides further evidence. This ISIS recruiter, who had created groups on Facebook to spread propaganda and attract new members, was arrested in Hyderabad in September 2015. Jabeen claimed that she was influenced by YouTube videos of ISIS and lectures by Muslim extremists. She operated as an online recruiter and indoctrinated many using a fake identity through Facebook. The same is true of Salman Mohiuddin, who created multiple Facebook

sociated with the Islamic State or al-Qaeda through their less-extremist video sermons and the like. Without other cultural influences to counter these, these individuals, often online loners, absorb hour after hour of one-sided propaganda urging them in the direction of jihad. The result, self-inspired jihadists who act alone or in smaller groups, is exactly what the jihadi forums want. They are encouraging foreigners, if they cannot join ISIS, to fight solo against Western nationals and properties as an effective way of instilling fear.

Then, in January of this year, the arrests of the 14 Army of the Caliph of India operatives brought the role of the Internet and social media in helping ISIS recruit fighters to strike against a foreign country into the lime-light. This ISIS unit in India has members who have frequently accessed ISIS propaganda materials and networked among themselves with ease. Nafees Khan of Hyderabad and Rizwan of Uttar Pradesh got much of their motivation to take up jihad from discussions on social media like Facebook. They accessed bomb making know how from publishing platforms like 'justpaste.it'.

From the social media accounts of Obeidullah Khan of Hyderabad, investigating agencies found ISIS videos and images that were frequently shared by him with his followers. It is clear that they used the Internet to connect with 'Gumnaam of Syria', or Shafi Armar, who is alleged to be the chief recruiter of the 14 men in Syria.

Though he is suspected to be in Iraq or Syria, the former Indian Mujahideen fighter recruited the

Youths had gone through many non-violent *da'wah* groups and online chat forums before their recruitment into ISIS.

groups to propagate Islamic State ideology. Mohiuddin was arrested in January 2016 while attempting to flee the country. Jabeen, also known as Nicky Joseph, moderated a Facebook group called "Islam Vs Christianity Friendly Discussion" to propagate Islam among nearly 50,000 followers.

Outside of direct recruitment, the virtual *da'wah* propagated via the Internet is a factor that should not be overlooked. Many young people apparently found their way to the websites of radical Islamic clerics as-

14 men online. Shafi Armar is well versed in Internet technology and use of social media, handling multiple accounts on Twitter and Facebook to carry out recruitment in India for militant activities, and he has used many online pseudonyms to evade scrutiny. He has been instrumental in influencing recruits from the Student Islamic Movement of India through Internet chatrooms or platforms like Trillian, Surespot, or Skype.

The National Investigation Agency of India recently stated that the Internet is a common factor in the radicalization of young Indians who have joined or want to join ISIS. During interrogations and subsequent counseling, it was noticed that through imagery and propaganda materials available on the Internet, those people were made to believe that Islam is in danger and only ISIS can save it.

As the case of India demonstrates, the Internet has proven to be the primary space for radicalization in those countries and communities where radical Islam is not the norm. Even though it is naïve to say that online activism is the main culprit behind the attacks in Europe and the growing international recruitment for ISIS, there is ample evidence that social media and the Internet has occasionally played a major role. Radicalization does not happen simply due to the availability of jihadi content on websites, but that content, along with like-minded communities, creates a space for those ideologies to grow.

Indeed, Internet chat rooms and social media fo-

rums have proved to be jihadi echo chambers, places where individuals find their worldviews and ideas supported and reverberated by other like-minded individuals, support which only furthers their extremism. This is the nature of social networks, and it plays right into ISIS's recruitment strategy.

It is a lesson that countries with laws regulating online behavior and banning hate speech must enforce them, and do as Twitter did when it shut down ISIS and al-Qaeda accounts. The company didn't need to target any specific political group, only maintain its policy of banning messages that encourage violence. At the same time, in many regions the authorities should not overlook the traditional outlets for youth radicalization, the prisons and madrasas that facilitate real-world interaction and networking among future extremist elements. But governments and their primary agencies must recognize the danger posed by the Internet and find ways to counteract it, for instance by promoting reputed, non-radical Islamic scholars and intervening through robust counter-narratives using same social media to prevent or reverse radicalization. The war against ISIS is not only military: it also takes place in the hearts and minds of the disaffected, who must be reached out to and shown that there are other ways. ■

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ISIS recruiter Shafi Armar

Two Enemies are Better than One

Differences between Al-Qaeda and ISIS will be key to their defeat

by Animesh Roul

A TWO-HEADED MONSTER now dominates the global terror trade. Al-Qaeda, the original militant Sunni Islamist network, spread and divided like a terrible virus. Despite the disarray caused by several strategic reversals over the years, the core of Al-Qaeda remains a potent force. The other powerful incarnation of terrorism arose in mid-2014 from Al-Qaeda's regional franchise in Iraq; it is now infamous as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS.

Even though the origin and objectives of these once-conjoined jihadist twins remain similar, sparring between them has widened the gap over ideology, space, and operational tactics. The two now compete for global standing, new recruits, and funds to sustain them against their Western enemies. Understanding the difference between these two jihadist organizations will be essential to defeating them, as both the West and Saudi Arabia's newly-formed anti-terrorist coalition hope to do.

The Jihadist Hydra

Much of the jihadist worldview that Al-Qaeda and ISIS hold in common can be traced to the writings and teachings of Al-Qaeda's present leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri. Where they differ—ISIS's brutal sectarian violence and bold military expansion—stems from the operational influence of Abu Musab

al-Zarqawi during the Iraq War.

The theological and strategic differences between the two groups were known much earlier, but they did not divide until ISIS's extreme violent ideals, territorial ambition, and possible expansion into the strongholds of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Yemen forced Al-Qaeda to dissociate itself from ISIS in February 2014.

The June 2014 Mosul assault demonstrated ISIS's ability to control territory and desire to establish a functional state with all aspects of military, civil, and religious governance. By seizing and controlling huge swathes of territory in Iraq and Syria and establishing its so-called caliphate, ISIS has pushed Al-Qaeda from its once dominant position in the jihadist movement. This territorial aggrandizement remains the foundation of ISIS's overarching criticism of Al-Qaeda, underscoring the latter's failure to work toward the establishment of an Islamic state.

The long-brewing differences between Al-Qaeda and its Iraqi franchise came into the open in early 2014 when Al-Qaeda's central leadership disowned its affiliate in the Levant region. The primary cause was Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Under al-Baghdadi, ISIS refused to obey Zawahiri's orders and operated independently of Jhabat Al-Nushra, another Al-Qaeda-mandated jihadist group active in Syria. In a scathing reaction to Al-Qaeda on April 17 of that year, a spokesman for ISIS released the audio of a speech denouncing the com-



Al-Qaeda's Osama bin Laden (deceased) and Ayman al-Zawahiri, 2001

mand of Al-Qaeda for having deviated from the path of its slain chief Osama bin Laden.

The gulf widened further when Al-Qaeda's Arabian Peninsula and Maghreb affiliates, in Yemen and North Africa respectively, vehemently criticized al-Baghdadi's Islamic caliphate and termed it illegitimate in subsequent months. Many Islamic clerics close to Al-Qaeda denounced the declaration of ISIS's caliphate, calling it "void and meaningless".

Al-Qaeda has emphasized that ISIS does not have the authority to rule all Muslims, and that ISIS's declarations apply to no-one but themselves. One cleric, who once mentored ISIS's slain spiritual leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, criticized them for their violence against fellow Muslims and advised them to "Reform, repent, and to stop killing Muslims and distorting the religion." In September 2015, Al-Qaeda leader al-Zawahiri released an audio message that accused ISIS's al-Baghdadi of sedition and again contended that al-Baghdadi is not the leader of all Muslims.

Nonetheless, according to the Global Terrorism Index created by The International Institute of Eco-

nomics and Peace, ISIS is now the richest and most violent jihadist group in modern history, with support from more than 40 different international militant Islamist groups including the deadliest in West Africa, Boko Haram. Al-Qaeda has desperately attempted to consolidate its position with a call for grassroots radicalization programs in Muslim majority and minority countries, but it cannot compete with the sponsorship or recruits received by ISIS.

Territorial aggrandizement remains the foundation of ISIS's overarching criticism of Al-Qaeda, underscoring the latter's failures.

There are many similarities between the two groups, ranging from their focus on building a caliphate to emphasis on the obligation of all Muslims to perform jihad. Both groups see Western democracies as an enemy of Muslims and disdain man-made laws as opposed to what they see as their divinely-mandated ones. Both groups encourage lone wolf attacks in the



Mugshots of ISIS's Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (deceased) and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

West and espouse sectarian ideals with extreme prejudice against non-believers and those they consider as un-Islamic, within Islam itself and other religions. Another aspect of convergence is the apocalyptic vision used by both groups to mobilize Islamists and justify religious violence.

It is their dissimilarities which are most significant, however, and there are a number of critical differences between the two jihadist groups. Understanding these differences is paramount to undermining their authority and devising an effective counter-strategy or, more aptly, a counter-narrative.

Islamic State Building

ISIS's establishment of its so-called caliphate, however contested, has provided them with a territorial base and safe haven for resource extraction, militant training, and the civil governance that Al-Qaeda failed to establish either in Afghanistan or the Middle Eastern region. ISIS has thus begun to emphasize state building, governance, and public services alongside territorial expansion and military consolidation. Close study of ISIS propaganda magazine *Dabiq* and other literature suggests that the group has a core principle of "remaining and expanding" (translated from "baqiya wa Tatamaddad").

The group entices and encourages Muslim professionals, e.g. doctors, engineers, and other skilled people,

to migrate to the caliphate rather than make pilgrimages to Mecca in Saudi Arabia, in order to assist in building an Islamic State government. It states that its aim is to expand into annexed Wilayats, or provinces, in Algeria, Egypt, Yemen, and parts of Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

Even though Al-Qaeda also aims to establish a caliphate in the distant future, its emphasis is on creating affiliates or franchises abroad, like Al-Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), to mastermind sporadic militant attacks on Western targets. As clear from "Al-Qaeda's General Guidelines for Jihad", written by Ayman al-

Zawahiri, Al-Qaeda's focus is on educating and training fighters who can face and "confront the Crusaders and their proxies, until the caliphate is established."

Al-Qaeda's strategy remains focused on militant activities in enemy countries, on providing military and tactical guidance for perpetrating violence, mostly jihadist, and on "promoting and protecting" the Muslim community worldwide. It embeds itself within localized Islamic insurgencies and encourages religious and social revolution in volatile regions.

Al-Qaeda thrives within failed states or defunct administrative machinery with limited firepower. It depends mostly on arms dealers and arsenal heists.

Both groups encourage lone wolf attacks in the West and espouse sectarian ideals with extreme prejudice against non-believers.

In contrast, ISIS forcefully inherited massive arms caches, mostly modern military equipment and vehicles, when it occupied Syrian and Iraqi territory and overpowered their national armies. Thus the conventional military strength of ISIS is much more organized and centralized than that of Al-Qaeda, which depends on its affiliates and their local connections to procure arms and munitions.

Two Enemies are Better than One

Though numbers are not fully known, it seems the manpower of ISIS is also much more than Al-Qaeda because of the foreign volunteers enticed by its propaganda. ISIS can be open in its recruitment methods, telling others to come to it in Iraq, whereas Al-Qaeda must be more secretive. Al-Qaeda's dwindling number of foot soldiers is due not only to mass defections in

has largely distinguished its brand of terrorism from others. The beheadings, burning of prisoners, and open executions that ISIS conducts have been criticized by senior Al-Qaeda commanders. Al-Qaeda leaderships called these violent displays “barbaric”, while emphasizing to its followers that Al-Qaeda’s jihadist strategy is more sustainable and a better way to defeat the Western democracies in a long religious battle.

ISIS has thus begun to emphasize state building, governance, and public services alongside territorial expansion and military consolidation.

As noticed in the recent Mali attacks, when Al-Qaeda released any hostages who could recite the Shahada (the Islamic statement of faith), Al-Qaeda has become more sympathetic to fellow Muslims. The organization has ap-

regions dominated by its affiliates, but also to its dependence on the slow recruiting methods of Mosques and Madrasa training. By recruiting openly on social media, however, ISIS has been able to romanticize jihad for many disillusioned youths. Fighters and service men are pouring into Syria and Iraq to join the group.

Violent Schism

There have been mass outcries against the gruesome methods displayed by ISIS on social media, which

parently mellowed from its earlier blood-lust, when it occasionally targeted other Muslims along sectarian lines. ISIS, however, shows no remorse in killing Muslims, and doesn't tolerate dissent or desertions among its ranks. Though both groups consider Shia Muslims to be apostates, Al-Qaeda has criticized ISIS's targeting of Shia and other sects of Muslims as too extreme.

These subtle degrees of difference between two competing jihadist movements creates prospects for counter-terrorism initiatives. The continued infighting could amplify the existing rivalry and lead to self-



A stockpile from an Al-Qaeda safe house in Iraq

destruction of the violent organizations.

A recent suicide bombing in southern Syria pushed the two in that direction. The mid-November attack of Al-Qaeda's Al-Nusra Front against the ISIS-linked Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade (YMB) of the Golan Heights left six YMB commanders dead, including the brigade leader. In retaliation, YMB released a gruesome execution video involving two Al-Nusra captives being tied and blown up with bombs, possibly in Daraa, Syria.

Muslims who were exposed to multiple interpretations of scripture were less likely to become extremists.

The in-fighting may also encourage the self-destruction of their violent ideology. That the two organizations offer competing narratives goes against their own maxim that the tenets of Islam are not open to interpretation. A 2013 Harvard study found that Muslims who were exposed to multiple interpretations of scripture were less likely to become extremists. ISIS is certainly able to recruit abroad among already suicidal youths, but these competing jihadists may inadvertently dissuade local Muslims away from extremism.

Despite the conflicts between the two organizations, there is also the threat of a future strategic convergence between ISIS and Al-Qaeda against a common foe. Significant progress by Western forces might unite the two. The main schism between Al-Qaeda and ISIS is rivalry over control of Syria; there is risk that they could resolve this amicably in order to face a larger and stronger common enemy.

Successes by the newly created anti-terrorism coalition of 34 Muslim nations led by Saudi Arabia, however, might not have the same effect. If it were to strategically target ISIS exclusively, it could encourage Al-Qaeda to distance itself further. ISIS has already declared war against Saudi Arabia following the formation of the latter's coalition. The next major indicator of the relationship between the two jihadist organizations will be whether Al-Qaeda, which has long been accused of being hand in glove with Saudi agencies in the Yemen civil war, will ultimately stand with or against ISIS in the ongoing ideological and military battle in the Muslim world. ■

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Al-Qaeda affiliate fighters in the Maghreb



Unending Violence, Elusive Peace

Afghanistan struggles for stability in the face of a splintered Taliban and a growing Islamic State

by Animesh Roul



THE SUICIDE attacks keep coming. A spate of violent incidents since the beginning of the year has pushed Afghanistan further into turmoil and despair. The security situation deteriorated with the announcement of the death of the Afghan Taliban's long-standing and reclusive leader, Mullah Muhammad Omar. A leadership struggle began, and the Taliban upped its indiscriminate violence in a bid to remain relevant as the Islamic State made its appearance on the stage. The subsequent announcement of a new leader has both divided the organization and provided renewed thrust to the Taliban's militant insurgency.

The incidence of violence is trending upwards, with the suffering of civilians reached a record high in the first six months of the year. The casualties came from suicide strikes, targeted killings, and bombings and shootouts at residential or government complexes. According to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, the civilian fatality figures reached 1,592 in the first half of 2015, as well as over 3,300 injured.

The government, under Ashraf Ghani successfully completed one year in office on September 21. Efforts had been underway to negotiate with the Taliban lead-

ership, with the assistance of Pakistan, but the outcome has been thrown into uncertainty. Already challenged by the withdrawal of US-NATO forces, the government must now face the Taliban's new leadership in addition to unpredictable factionalism among the militants and the rise of the Islamic State in the region.

After the announcement of the Taliban's new leader, the violence increased. Although the news of the death of supreme Taliban leader Mullah Omar, who was also head of the former Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, came two years after his passing, it triggered pitched battles between competing groups of Taliban and a barrage of suicide attacks against security forces across the country.

Reinforcing the Rage

August 7 was one of the bloodiest days since the new government took over in Afghanistan, with the Taliban unleashing coordinated attacks against the army, police, and the U.S. Special Forces in Kabul. Over 50 people were killed. These violent attacks were more than a lethal show of force: they signaled the renewed unity of the Taliban in the aftermath of their leadership struggle.

The suicide attacks at the Kabul Police Academy and a nearby army complex alone killed 42 people and injured over 300. Taliban militants also targeted Camp

Integrity, which houses U.S. and coalition troops who help train Afghan forces; nine were killed and over 20 injured. Camp Integrity is run by U.S security contractor Academi, formerly Blackwater. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid claimed responsibility for both the police academy and Camp Integrity attacks, but refrained from claiming responsibility for the vehicle-borne IED attack on the army complex in central Kabul.

On the following day, Taliban militants again carried out a suicide attack at a pro-government militia gathering in the Khanabad district of Kunduz Province, killing at least 22 people and injuring several others. The militia, known as Arbakai, has been one of the community policing groups active in Southwest Afghanistan, as well as helping government forces fight both Taliban elements and Islamic State militants. Two days later, on August 10, Taliban militants triggered a car bomb explosion near Kabul International Airport, killing at least five people.

Less than two weeks later, the violence once again reached the streets of Kabul, when on August 22 a car bomb targeted a convoy carrying civilian NATO contractors. Some 12 people were killed near a Kabul hospital, and around 105 people were injured. The slain contractors worked for DynCorp International, which provides training, security, and aviation maintenance to

the NATO and U.S. missions and the Afghan security forces (police and military). The Taliban continued to insist that the attacks are targeted only at security forces and international contractors and are not meant to involve civilians.

President Ghani said that war had been declared against Afghans from within Pakistani territory.

The relentless violence has forced President Ghani to improve ties with neighboring Pakistan and Taliban forces at home, knowing very well that Pakistan has a strong hold over Taliban leadership. He warned Islamabad to rein in the Taliban elements holed up in Pakistan as well as the terror training infrastructures in the country. In clear terms, Ghani said that war had been declared against Afghans from within Pakistani territory.

Taliban Infighting and Unity

At the helm of the Taliban, Mullah Omar was replaced by Mullah Akhtar Mansour, who was aviation minister in the Taliban government between 1996 and 2001. He became supreme leader in a swift decision by the Taliban's Quetta Shura (council), which he himself headed. In a statement confirming Omar's death, Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid announced that Mullah Akhtar Mansour had been elevated as the Taliban's new leader.

The appointment angered Omar's family members and many senior Taliban leaders, including Tayib Agha, Mullah Zakir, Mullah Dadullah, and Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob, Mullah Omar's eldest son. They rejected Mansour's appointment and accused him of being a Pakistani agent. The most prominent opposition was led by Mullah Dadullah, who publicly refused to pledge allegiance to Mansour. This triggered gun battles in Zabul Province between forces loyal to one or the other.

Open fighting, however, subsided in mid-September as relatives of Mullah Omar, including Yaqoob,



Taliban Leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour



Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry

agreed to back Mansour as his successor. Sirajuddin Haqqani, the scion of the infamous Haqqani network active along the Pakistani border, would serve as his deputy. This news of reconciliation came only after weeks of uncertainty, infighting, and mindless displays of violence across the country.

I.S. propaganda units are active against the Taliban and Al Qaeda leaderships, pointing to their failure to establish Sharia rule.

The Afghan Islamic State

The three months of infighting threatened the fragile peace process and the so-called reconciliation with the Afghan government. Speculations are rife that the situation may have opened opportunities for the Islamic State (I.S.) to expand its foothold inside Afghanistan. Since the advent of IS in the region, most of the disgruntled Taliban leaders have already shifted their allegiance to the leadership of I.S.'s Wilayat Khurasan, the name it gives its purported province in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

After June 2014, intermittent information emerged about inroads being made by I.S. into Afghanistan, in accordance with the Islamic State's roadmap to world domination. The region known as Khurasan is well within the ambit of I.S. expansion. In February this year, I.S. flags surfaced in Afghanistan's Ghazni and Nimroz provinces, following which large numbers of Taliban militants switched their allegiance to I.S. Although recently slain, before his death I.S.'s deputy commander in Afghanistan, Abdul Rauf Khadim, had prepared the ground for the organization to consolidate its power in the Helmand region, where he was actively engaged in recruiting Afghan fighters to I.S.

The Afghanistan branch of I.S. has already announced its intentions and proved its firepower. In a show of force, it perpetrated its first-ever strike in Jalalabad on April 18 this year, killing more than 33 people and injuring over a hundred more outside a bank where government workers were collecting their salaries. I.S. spokesman Shahidullah Shahid claimed responsibility for this anti-government and anti-civilian assault.

In the wake of the disagreement and infighting that followed the Taliban's change in leadership, it is likely that more senior commanders who refuse to

accept Mansour as their supreme leader will defect to I.S. The first known instance of this came on September 8, when Mullah Dadullah pledged allegiance to I.S. after he was rescued by I.S. militants from an offensive by Taliban militants in Zabul province. Sources indicated that Mullah Omar's brother, Abdul Manan, is likely to join the I.S. group rather than pledge allegiance to Mansour.

I.S. propaganda units are already active against the Taliban and Al Qaeda leaderships, pointing to their failure to establish Sharia rule or a Caliphate in the region even after decades of struggle. Already in the past, it had questioned Mullah Omar's spiritual and political credibility. The Taliban's infighting and leadership struggle has ultimately been a boon for the Islamic State in the region, and neither the Ghani government or Mansour's Taliban have adequately struck back.

Elusive Peace

Following the series of violent incidents in August, President Ghani and other advocates for a settlement are becoming skeptical of the option's plausibility. The arrival of I.S. on the one hand and Pakistan's influence over the Taliban on the other could negate the outcome of any talks. Ghani has already pointed fingers at Pakistan for its hidden role, and urged Islamabad to rein in the Taliban echelons under its direct influ-

ence. Though Pakistan denies any involvement in the Taliban's decision-making process, the Afghan government has warned its neighbor that its actions or lack thereof jeopardize several bilateral efforts, including a cross-border trade pact and intelligence sharing aimed at rapprochement between the two countries.

The Taliban's newly crowned leader is believed to be a moderate and an advocate of peace talks with the Afghan government, but the situation remains fluid after the breaking of the well-concealed news of Mullah Omar's death. The Pakistan-led peace talks to be held July 31 between the Taliban and the Afghan government were cancelled due to uncertainties over the militants' leadership. The first round held earlier that month had ended without producing tangible results.

The Islamic State may be a growing threat in the region, but if there is to be peace, President Ghani has made it clear his main concern is grappling with Pakistan's hidden agenda. Nonetheless, the U.S. and other stakeholders appear convinced that the Pakistan-led talks with the Taliban are the only forward in the so-called 'peace process' in embattled Afghanistan. ■

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Afghan Taliban, 2013



Tremors in the Himalayas

Poverty-stricken Nepal faces an uphill climb after two terrible earthquakes, but its politicians and neighbors see only their own opportunities



by Animesh Roul and Akanshya Shah

TWO SUCCESSIVE earthquakes, first on April 25 of this year and then on May 12, visited death and devastation on the tiny Himalayan nation of Nepal. The tragedy took the lives of more than 8,000 people and left thousands more wounded and more than a million homeless and displaced. These earthquakes and their hundreds of aftershocks, which continued into June, damaged more than a million homes as well as the morale of a country known for its brave and resilient Gurkha people.

The earthquakes have added unprecedented misery to communities already suffering from years of political instability and economic downturn. The international community, especially Nepal's neighbors, India and China, have stepped forward with immense aid efforts. Nestled between the two great Asian powers, Nepal may benefit from their political rivalry in its reconstruction efforts.

The nation is nonetheless in dire need. The government and civil administration face a humongous task of infrastructure rebuilding, with needs including providing temporary structures for the quake-hit pop-

ulation, repairing damaged government buildings, and restoring destroyed historical monuments and world heritage sites like Bhaktapur and Patan.

In all probability, the volume of destruction is much greater than the official estimates. The country witnessed a number of its iconic UNESCO World Heritage sites and popular tourist attractions reduced to piles of rubble. Among the well-known Kathmandu landmarks destroyed by the quake was the 200-foot Dharahara Tower. Built in 1832, the landmark was cut

Nestled between the two great Asian powers, Nepal may benefit from their political rivalry in its reconstruction efforts.

down to a 30-foot pile of bricks. And many more historic Hindu and Buddhist holy sites were destroyed.

The most urgent task is twofold. First, the government has to send food and supplies to the remote villages—a process which will be hugely hindered by the upcoming monsoon season. Second, there are many villages that are no longer inhabitable, and the people now residing in camps must be evacuated and

resettled in secure temporary shelters that can resist the monsoons.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the U.N., the 7.8 magnitude earthquake, the country's biggest in 80 years, has left some 3.5 million people in need of food assistance—especially as the agriculture sector in the western and central regions were hit hardest. FAO also states that some \$8 million is urgently needed to help disaster-struck Nepalese farmers recover lost agricultural inputs and resume preparations in time for the imminent rice-sowing season. In addition, Nepal has suffered a loss of over \$420 million in the tourism sector. With trekking and Everest routes closed due to avalanches, a government report has estimated a loss of around \$10 million in the mountaineering sector, and the damages to cultural and historic sites have caused a loss of \$70 million.

The Aid Competition

In the aftermath of these devastating earthquakes, several humanitarian aid groups and search-and-rescue teams from India, China, and the U.S. have extended their support and expressed their willingness to assist Nepal in its reconstruction efforts. Neighboring South

Asian countries, including the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, have also reached out with what assistance they could offer.

More than 70 international rescue teams assisted the government in the initial operations. India's team arrived within several hours of the disaster on April 25. They ferried in aid workers and relief supplies, includ-

The 7.8 magnitude earthquake, the country's biggest in 80 years, has left some 3.5 million people in need of food assistance.

ing medicines, meals, blankets, and tents, and rushed in experts to assist in search and rescue operations. The magnanimity of international support and humanitarian assistance was huge. There were suspicions, however, that relief efforts were not entirely altruistic.

Nepal shares an open border with India, and the latter considers it a buffer state against China. As with other smaller South Asian countries, however, China has emerged as an important player in Nepal's economic development. This has often led to clandestine clashes in Nepal between the two giants, with com-



Students practice earthquake drill, Matatirtha, Nepal



Dharahara, before and after the earthquake

petition in vital sectors like hydropower, tourism, and infrastructure development. Although India traditionally has closer ties with Nepal and accords the country special status, China's contribution to Nepal's overall economic development has significantly risen.

Soon after the disaster, on May 1, China announced that it would triple its \$3 million in aid to Nepal while dispatching a 215-member military rescue team comprising People's Liberation Army members to the country. Chinese President Xi Jinping was quick to express concerns and condolences to his Nepalese counterpart Ram Baran Yadav, promising that China "is willing to offer all necessary disaster assistance".

Neighboring India, which also suffered from the earthquakes in its Northeast region, quickly moved its resources to engage in rescue and relief operations in the affected areas of Nepal. India's National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) was at the forefront of the rescue operation, and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi rallied his nation to his neighbor's cause with the words "Nepal's pain is our pain."

A full-fledged Indian Army humanitarian effort

was launched to mitigate the disaster in Nepal. Entitled "Operation Maitri", it was targeted at sustained rescue and relief operations. India sent nearly 200 tons of supplies, including drinking water, food, and medicine. Along with hundreds of NDRF personnel, reconnaissance and earth-moving equipment, makeshift tents, blankets, and makeshift hospitals reached Nepal by air or road within the first crucial 48 hours of the disaster. Operation Maitri turned out to be the largest relief and rescue mission undertaken by India outside its own borders.

Speculation was rife, however, about whether India's efforts were disaster relief or disaster diplomacy, purely altruistic or an effort to outdo China and impress Nepal in its most difficult hour. Indian Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar insisted India's assistance had no ulterior motives, but that since India has the capability to help, it was doing so. Speaking to CNN, Jaishankar stated that India's aid had nothing to do with China but was a "gut reaction" to the tragedy.

Unfortunately the humanitarian efforts did not go smoothly. There were complaints of inadequate

provisions, lack of basic hospital care, and scarce medical supplies. The Indian government drew flack when custom officials delayed clearance for relief goods even though the Nepalese government had waived customs duties for relief materials to facilitate access. India's response, however, created headlines that put the Chinese army "on the defensive". A news story in Nepal's *Annapurna Post* highlighted Chinese reservations in the face of the overwhelming presence of Indian military personnel in Nepal.

Reconstruction Hurdles

The Nepalese government is faced with a humongous task, needing to rebuild around 10,000 schools and health posts. A minimum of another 500,000 private houses are to be built, for which subsidies and loans have been announced. According to the World Bank, Nepal's recovery needs amount to over a third of its economy. The Post-Disaster Assessment Need (PDNA) report prices the damage at \$5.15 billion, losses at \$1.9 billion, and recovery needs at \$6.6 billion. On the basis of the assessment, the Nepalese government has called for international help.

At the June 25 donors' conference in Kathmandu, titled 'Towards Resilient Nepal', the E.U., U.S., Japan, India, China, and monetary organizations

like the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank announced reconstruction packages to bail Nepal out of its current crisis. The reconstruction efforts are based on the findings of the PDNA report, which highlights Nepal's need for both financial and technical aid. Nepal is requesting international support for its robust reconstruction plan, estimated to cost \$6.6 billion over a five-year period, according to the PDNA report. Over 36 countries and 24 donor agencies were invited to the conference.

The political uncertainty and years of instability have been further aggravated by the intense loss of life and infrastructure caused by the disaster.

Observers are unanimous on one thing: the international or regional donors must ensure the funds are used for rebuilding Nepal's socio-economic backbone, not helping the political or bureaucratic elites of the country who could exploit the situation in their favor. Clamor for an independent body directly under the President or a former Chief Justice in order to ensure effective use of reconstruction resources is increasing in Nepal.

Nepal's government is not known for its effi-



House after the earthquake

Tremors in the Himalyas

ciency. The country's democracy has suffered ever since its foundation due to political wrangling. Nepal's first Constituent Assembly (C.A.), elected in 2008, was tasked with writing a new and inclusive constitution. However, after years of inter- and intra-party feuds and extensions, the C.A. was dissolved in 2012 due to lack of agreement over the division of states within Nepal.

This resulted in the election of a second C.A. in November 2013. The recent earthquake prompted the political leaders to sign an historic agreement a week later that would divide the country into eight federal states. This agreement maintained that the boundaries would be decided in the future by a federal commission and that the names of the states would be chosen by a two-thirds majority vote in the new state assemblies. The Supreme Court of Nepal, however, found the agreement incomplete and directed the C.A. to decide on the names and demarcation of the federal states.

In the midst of tragedy, the political landscape of Nepal is once again in disarray. The country's ruling party, the National Congress, came under intense criticism from the people for its delay in responding to the disaster with rescue and relief efforts. The hope that the 16-point agreement had generated in the country, which could have ended years of political deadlock, has once again left the people in despair. The political uncertainty and years of instability have been further aggravated by the intense loss of life and infrastructure caused by the disaster.

The Nepalese government is facing an uphill climb. Even if India and China just want to boost their image in the region, Nepal could use their help. There is thus tremendous regional and international goodwill at its side, but the management and implementations of post-earthquake action plans remain a challenge for Kathmandu. In addition to efficient allocation of funds, the country needs to ensure it follows a lasting and sustainable development strategy. The 16-point agreement among the top four political parties of Nepal brought much respite to the people, but the nation's constitution drafting process must move ahead alongside post-disaster reconstruction efforts in order bring confidence and inspiration to a recovering nation. ■

Ms. Saha is a Nepali journalist with over 13 years of experience in political and constitutional reportage. She is currently the Delhi bureau chief of the Annapurna Post, a Nepali daily, and is engaged in research work on Indo-Nepal relations.

Mr. Roul is a Delhi-based public policy analyst specializing in counterterrorism, radical Islam, terror financing, issues relating to armed conflict and violence.

The Facts

Two successive earthquakes struck Nepal in less than 20 days, killing thousands of people and leaving millions homeless: on April 25, a 7.8-magnitude earthquake with its epicenter in the Lamjung district, east of the capital Kathmandu; on May 12, a 7.3-magnitude earthquake centered around the border of Dolakha and Sindhupalchowk districts. The Department of Internal Affairs has confirmed at least 8,583 deaths.

The Democratic Republic of Nepal is a landlocked country located in South Asia, with a population of approximately 27 million. Its capital, Kathmandu, which was hit hardest by the earthquakes, is the country's most populous city. Although the actual damage caused in the valley has yet to be ascertained, rapid urbanization and unplanned development in the capital during the last decade have directly contributed to the massive scale of damage.

The earthquakes affected almost 39 districts, and ten districts suffered over one hundred deaths. According to official estimates, 22,310 individuals were injured, 2,656 government buildings were fully damaged, another 3,622 were partially damaged, and 512,054 private houses were destroyed.

Speaking with Ram Sharan Mahat, Nepal's Finance Minister

"The scale of the damage was massive and the country's preparedness and responsiveness was almost nil," Mahat told THE GLOBAL INTELLIGENCE. The country is facing a \$7-8 billion dollar collective loss in its overall economy, which includes losses in infrastructure, tourism, agriculture, real estate, and more, he said. "It is a massive task of infrastructure rebuilding in Nepal." Although he claimed that at an aggregate level the government handled the situation well, reports emerged from remote parts of Nepal as recently as June that there still is a shortage of food and lack of access to clean drinking water.

Speaking with Dr. Govinda Raj Pokhrel, Vice-Chairman of the National Planning Commission of Nepal

"Once the PDNA is ready, we will go for full mobilization in terms of rebuilding," said Pokhrel. "All private and donor assistance can move ahead in collaboration and coordination with government agencies. We will develop certain mechanisms to prevent overlap in reconstruction work."

These earthquakes hit nearly 20 percent of the population, he said, and they have stifled Nepal's efforts to fight poverty. The World Bank estimated that an additional 3 percent of the population has been pushed into poverty as a direct result of the disaster.

South Asia's Islamic State

ISIS recruitment campaigns seek allegiances in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and even India

by Animesh Roul

THERE ARE THOSE who want a second Islamic State, one encompassing Afghanistan, Pakistan, and parts of Central Asia and India. In January, Abu Muhammad al Adnani, a chief spokesperson of ISIS, announced the establishment of “Wilayat Khurasan”, an imaginary territory made up of those nations within South Asia.

The 2014 push by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to establish a caliphate marked a definite shift in the Jihadist landscape previously dominated by Al-Qaeda. Unhindered almost until now, the successful rise of ISIS under the leadership of Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-proclaimed Caliph Ibrahim, has given the organization enough clout to push the ideals of the Islamic State (I.S.) in other Muslim-dominated regions.

ISIS first began outreach efforts in South Asia to acquire recruits and resources for its battles in Iraq and Syria. Several Muslim youths from India, Pakistan, the Maldives, and Bangladesh have reportedly travelled to fight under the I.S. banner in Iraq and Syria. Since June 2014, the call of ISIS has not only resonated within the region's myriad militant groups, it has also reached many unconnected individuals through propaganda disseminated on social media.

The January announcement of the formation of Wilayat Khurasan, an ‘Islamic State of South Asia’,

may be wishful, but it marks a new direction for recruitment efforts. ISIS is not only seeking to draw young soldiers to its side but to empower them to spread its cause in other regions. Adnani announced that the new I.S. province would be headed by Hafiz Saeed Khan, a former Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan commander, who earlier released a video message pledging allegiance to the I.S. along with at least 100 Taliban fighters. The video also showed the beheading of a Pakistan army

ISIS is not only seeking to draw young soldiers to its side but to empower them to spread its cause in other regions.

soldier. Adnani stated that Khan fulfilled all necessary conditions to become the governor of the so-called I.S. Khurasan province of South Asia.

The ‘Af-Pak ISIS’

Khan and his fellow jihadists released the gruesome oath-taking video in early January as one of the newly splintered groups emerging from the dis-

integration of the Pakistan Taliban last year. The beheading carried out by Saeed Khan and others, perhaps the first anti-Pakistan operation by the I.S. Khurasan, marked the arrival of the ISIS brand of violent jihad in the region.

Concerns aired by a U.N. envoy recently about I.S. inroads into Afghanistan were not misplaced. The Islamic State has established a substantial support base in Afghanistan, where Al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders are struggling to remain relevant in the face of I.S.'s growing stature in the Levant region and beyond. The

Al-Salafi is reportedly involved in an ISIS recruitment campaign and is charging ISIS about \$600 per person.

black flags of I.S. have been hoisted in the Ghazni and Nimroz provinces of Afghanistan. Hundreds of Taliban Mujahideen have reportedly switched allegiances to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the Islamic State.

The Taliban has fought against losing ground in Afghanistan. Direct confrontations occurred in the Kajaki district between supporters of the Islamic State and followers of Taliban warlord Abdul Rahim Akhund in January.

Before the formalization of Wilayat Khurasan, Pakistan was at the periphery of I.S. influence. There were occasional ISIS flags and graffiti in support of I.S. ideals, as well as verbal support from radical clerics like Maulana Abdul Aziz, who urged Taliban militants to pledge their allegiance to the Islamic State. Lesser-known extremist organizations, like the Tahreek-e-Khilafat Wa Jihad (Movement for the Caliphate and Jihad - TKJ), as well as anti-Shiite militant groups, such as Jundullah, expressed support for ISIS and al-Baghdadi. ISIS even received support from established sectarian groups like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and Ahl-e-Sunnat Wal Jamaat.

However, the unearthing of an ISIS recruitment drive in Pakistan raised eyebrows in security circles. Unconfirmed reports suggest that

by October, ISIS had recruited thousands of youths from the Hangu and Kurram regions. Pakistani agencies arrested Yousaf al-Salafi, from Lahore, on January 20 for recruiting youths and sending them abroad for jihad. Al-Salafi, a Syrian of Pakistani origin, was reportedly involved in an ISIS recruitment campaign and charging ISIS about \$600 per person.

The Expansion of the Islamic State

The existence of a dedicated I.S. unit in Afghanistan and Pakistan raises the threat of a consolidated front for the jihadi organizations in the region. The number of recent arrests and detainments of Islamic State supporters and sympathizers at airports and elsewhere in the neighboring Maldives, Bangladesh, and India have shown the reach of grassroots radical Islam in the region. The growing presence of an official I.S. in South Asia can only make it worse.

The Maldives have experienced a series of jihadi-related departures since October 2013, when young Maldivians began travelling to Syria and Iraq to participate in the civil war alongside jihadist formations like Jabhat al Nusra and the earlier incarnation of ISIS. By late October 2014, at least six people, including a family of four from Raa Atoll, had travelled to ISIS-held territory in Syria and Iraq from the Maldives.



Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ISIS' leader in Iraq



ISIS promotional photograph

Social media's role in the radicalization process in the Maldives remains noteworthy. A number of pro-Islamic State Facebook and Twitter pages have urged young Maldivian Muslims to "strive for the caliphate and to stand up against the [the country's] existing democratic system of governance". I.S. influence reached the Maldivian shores through social media websites, for instance the "Islamic State of Maldives" (ISM) Facebook group, whose members claim to be

want just Islam," and "Sharia will dominate the world."

In Bangladesh, established Islamist groups like the Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh and more radical and violent Ansarullah Bangla Team are believed to be in contact with I.S. leaders. Footage also emerged in 2014 showing Bangladeshi nationals fighting in Syria, and youths declaring their allegiance to al-Baghdadi. In September last year, Bangladesh police arrested a Bangladeshi-Briton recruiter for ISIS, identified as Samiun Rahman, on terror charges. Rahman was reportedly in the country to recruit volunteers for jihad in Syria and Iraq. His interrogations led to the arrest of at least five suspected militants, including members of the Ansarullah Bangla Team.

Fresh evidence of the Islamic State's inroads into Bangladesh came on January 19, when police detained Sakhawatul Kabir, along with three other people, in possession of incriminating documents and a laptop containing jihadi information. Kabir was subsequently identified as the regional commander of the Islamic State's operations in Bangladesh, while his associate Anwar Hossain was identified as the group's local financier.

The I.S. footprint in South Asia suggests that there is immense traction for its ideology in the region.

affiliated with the Islamic State. The flag of the I.S. was hoisted in the Malé's Raalhugandu area by unidentified individuals in July that year. I.S. flags were also seen during an early August protest march in the capital, Malé, against the Israeli offensive on Gaza City. The following month, pro-Islamist hardliners descended on the streets of Malé holding I.S. flags and banners, calling for the implementation of Sharia law in the country. Some of the banners read: "We want the laws of the Quran, not the green book [Maldivian constitution]," "Islam will eradicate secularism," "No democracy, we

How Far Can it Reach?

Even in India, sporadic incidents, like the waving of I.S. flags and masked men wearing shirts with I.S. insignias, were noticed in Kashmir and Tamil Nadu

between July and October 2014. Before that, in May, four Indian engineering students travelled to Iraq via a third country to join ISIS forces. Areeb Majeed, a radicalized youth, who returned to India recently, confessed to having undergone training in suicide bombing. While the remaining three youths are still inside the war zone, this event demonstrated I.S.'s growing support base in India.

At the same time, Indian security officials arrested business executive Mehdi Mashroor Biswas in mid-December for running a pro-I.S. Twitter account. It was being used for incitement and propaganda targeting Muslim youths wanting to join the Caliphate. Moreover, al-Baghdadi's call was endorsed by well-known Sunni cleric Maulana Salman Nadwi in India. And in Tamil Nadu, imam Faizur Rahman facilitated an I.S. campaign in the Southern Indian state by procuring, printing, and distributing materials in support of the Islamic State.

In addition to these supporters for the cause of I.S., there is an increasing threat of lone wolves in the region. I.S. and Al-Qaeda have both encouraged the idea of fighting solo against Western nationals and properties as a way to instill fear. Such concerns have intensified in India after the arrest of Anees Ansari in Mumbai in October. He confessed he had attempted a knife attack on a U.S. national to get support and sympathy from ISIS. Ansari too had reportedly collected details from the Internet about 'Flame Throwers' and 'Thermite' bombs and hinted at a plot to target U.S. establishments, including a school in Mumbai.

Although the transnational jihadi group continues to find supporters in the region, I.S. has known major setbacks as well. Three top regional commanders have been killed in separate incidents, two in Afghanistan and one in Syria. The regional jihadi forces are also divided, largely on operational and ideological grounds, between the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda announced a South Asian branch in the Indian subcontinent in September and has been increasingly focusing on long-term consolidations in order to dominate the militant Islamist discourse in the subcontinent.

Between I.S. and Al-Qaeda influences, however, the risk is only growing. The I.S. footprint in South Asia suggests that there is immense traction for its ideology in the region. With its massive outreach efforts using social networks and releasing propaganda materials to galvanize support, I.S. has gained significant momentum within a short span of time. The Pakistan-Afghanistan border region is at risk of becoming another I.S. conflict situation, and the Islamic State of Khurasan is likely only the beginning. With the absence of regional cohesion among governments, especially on a unified counterterrorism strategy, there is an increasing risk of I.S. establishing pockets of influence in South Asian countries. ■

Mr. Roul is a New-Delhi-based public policy analyst, with specializations in counterterrorism, radical Islam, terror financing, issues relating to armed conflict and violence.



ISIS recruitment video

In Memory of Probir Kumar Sarkar

With this issue, we pay our respects to the memory of Probir Kumar Sarkar, founder and Executive Editor of *The Global Intelligence*, who passed away unexpectedly in April.

Mr. Sarkar had a long and respected history as a journalist, writing for the *Wall Street Journal Asia* and *India Today* in Delhi before relocating to the United States in 1990, where he joined the staff of the *Hollywood Reporter* and worked as the U.S. Foreign Correspondent for *Organizer Weekly*. He was a longtime contributor to *Reason* magazine, from which he took his motto: "Free minds and free markets." Having fled the partition of East Pakistan as a child, Mr. Sarkar grew up in India in the shadow of the Cold War and migrated to North America. With the view that democratic freedom brings with it responsibility, he chose to pursue that responsibility as a journalist, holding politicians to account and keeping a spotlight on the risks to liberty in the world at large. After immigrating to Canada with his family, he founded *The Global Intelligence* with the vision of presenting a balanced and international perspective on global affairs for the leaders and decision-makers of the world. Over the past six years, I worked closely with Mr. Sarkar on *The Global Intelligence*, and I know that he dedicated himself to providing our readers with a timely and practical analysis of world events that managed to combine a respect for free markets, human rights, and the democratic process.

The Global Intelligence represents not only the culmination of Mr. Sarkar's life's work, but also a dream that he carried with him for a long time. His dream was that, through engagement and discussion, investigation and analysis, the world could be better informed to face the decisions of its future and avoid the horrors of its past. It is in the spirit of this vision that *The Global Intelligence* will continue on now with this Autumn 2017 edition.

In the penultimate Editor's Comment that Mr. Sarkar penned for *The Global Intelligence*, he wrote the following: ... *We march on under the banner of truth, supported not by clicks, advertising, government, or big business ... critical of every government when it falters and every political ideology when it oversteps realities ... we renew our pledge to be a pioneer of truth and humanity.*

As the globe navigates uncertain waters, *The Global Intelligence* will hold steady to that pledge. This issue is dedicated to the memory of Probir Kumar Sarkar, a champion of the value of truth and thought, and we hereby rededicate *The Global Intelligence* to the values that he established and that are so crucial in our present era.

If you have a moment to hold in memory of a visionary journalist, please reflect on the value and importance of Mr. Sarkar's dream in the world today.

— Benjamin Bruce Hayward
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