



## **CISS Analysis on**

### **The Behemoth of IS (Islamic State): One year on and continuing**

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It has been a year since IS (Islamic State) declared a 'Caliphate' on 29 June, 2014, which happened to be the first day of Ramadan. Defying the early prospects of a movement holding large swaths of territory and administering a parallel system of government, that would strain and spend itself, the behemoth of IS trudges its way forward despite setbacks in Kobane and Tikrit to gobble up more land and expand its influence. Its recent routing of Syrian government forces in Palmyra and the drubbing of Iraqi government forces in Ramadi, capital of Anbar, on May 14, 2015, make IS the predominant power of half of Syria and one-third of Iraq respectively. The Islamic State, declaring its genesis in the aftermath of its taking control over Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, in June 2014, consummated its first birth anniversary with simultaneous attacks on June 26 on a tourist beach resort in Sousse, Tunisia and Shiite mosque in Kuwait, killing more than 50 people in both attacks.

What started as a small but extreme militant movement in the Sunni heartlands of Iraq, has transmogrified into a powerful transnational organization (or state as it calls itself) holding territories that straddle both Syria and Iraq, even attempting to sneak into the Lebanese villages of Qalamoun. In addition to its physical control of territories in Iraq and Levant, a plethora of other militant and terrorist groups have pledged allegiance to IS, spreading the latter's ideological tentacles. Militant groups affiliated with IS control Sirte and Darna in Libya. Chechen Islamist groups have established four wilaya (governorates) in Caucasus, pledging allegiance to IS. While anti-Hezbollah militant group 'Ahrar al-Sunna' in Lebanon too has sought ideological succor from the Legion of Lost Souls (Robert Fisk's phrase for IS). Not to mention Jamaat ul-Ahrar in Pakistan, splinter groups of Taliban in Afghanistan and Boko Haram of Nigeria, all trying to hop onto the bandwagon of IS. How much does this 'ideological relationship' change the equation on the ground is a moot point and an exaggerated one too one might add, but what it does imply clearly is the creeping influence of IS within certain groups in the Muslim world.

The rise of IS has also witnessed the concomitant brutality and cruelty let loose on ethnic and religious minorities. Islamic State aims and has tried to exterminate groups that it considers apostates- Christians, Shiites, Yazidis, Shabak and Turkmen. It recently executed two women in Syria for sorcery. The accumulated infamy that IS has garnered for its brutal actions-mass murders, decapitations, burning human corpses- has led to considerable moral outrage, but a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon of IS demands an approach that does not stop at moral cringing. It must resort to the eternal cliché of political discourse: tracing the root causes.

Understanding the phenomenon of IS and its future prospects not only requires a cognizance of the political vacuum and resentment in Middle East brought about by foreign invasions and internal political decay, but requires a deeper appreciation of IS' ideological underpinnings that make young Muslims throng its ranks and a political economy of black market and external support that sustains it and makes it one the 'richest' terrorist organizations.

The invasion of Iraq by USA in 2003 was followed by a subsequent systemic deinstitutionalization of state by Coalition Provisional Authority. Ba'ath party was banned; Republican Guard and Conscript army were dismantled and a new power structure was fashioned based essentially on sectarianism. The reconfigured power structure in post-invasion Iraq became a source of resentment for Sunni tribes, former army officers in Republican Guards and Conscript army and members of Ba'ath party. All of them had benefited under their patron, Saddam Hussein. The resultant resistance movement in the Sunni heartlands of Samarra and Fallujah were later to prove to be the springboard for Islamic State of Iraq, which would morph into ISIS and ultimately just IS. When American forces left Iraq in late 2011, they left behind a limping state, which had been reduced to a shadow of its former self and was deeply sectarianised and institutionally emasculated. It provided germane ground for militants to assert their power. External financial support by Gulf States to these militant groups in Iraq to 'resist' and 'halt' what they considered the 'increasing arc of Shia influence,' brought about by a war which they wholeheartedly supported, helped sustain these groups which would later expand to Syria in the wake of Arab Spring. The callous and insensitive approach of the ruling elite in both Syria and Iraq equally contributed to the macabre mess that IS has made of Middle East.

The political economy of black market, extortion, ransom, control of oil fields and dams, has helped entrench an illicit self-sustaining economic racket that finances the campaigns of IS and sustains its burgeoning cadres. Equally important but less discussed, though, is the ideological underpinning of IS. Its 'caliphate' is a travesty, no doubt; its totalitarian ideology is sickeningly sectarian and brutal, but its impeccable propaganda that weaves a discourse out of a colonial past that artificially fragmented Middle East into arbitrary boundaries and a 'neo-colonial' present sustained by venal and corrupt ruling clique, partially explains the support, however minuscule in the Muslim world.

The strategy of aerial strikes, undertaken by US and spurred in the wake of the siege of Yazidis in Zinbar province in Iraq in August 2014, has failed to put a serious dent on IS except occasionally. The political ambivalence of coalition partners led by USA has impeded the effectiveness of the aerial strikes. They pound IS bases in Iraq but are reluctant to coordinate with the Iran-supported Shia militias on ground. In Syria the problem for coalition partners is not only IS but Assad regime too, which happens to be the strongest force in Syria battling IS and Nusra Front. The takeover of Kobane and most recently the Syrian border-town of Abyad by Kurds with American air protective cover, demonstrate the probability of success of aerial strikes if coordinated with ground forces.

The future prospects of IS reside in its vitality as an organization, the internal decay and chaos prevailing in Syria and Iraq and the ambivalence of regional and international powers which are bent on Asad with a 'moderate' leader without effectively dealing with ISIS. All these factors have been vital to the expansion of IS and will continue to sustain it as long as these conditions exist. In order to eliminate or even curtail IS activities a multi-pronged approach is needed that takes into account the above-highlighted factors that gave birth to IS and continue to sustain it. The effectiveness of aerial strikes are marred by political equivocalness. Moreover a political economy of illicit trade may further strengthen IS in near future. 'Course Correctives' in that realm could possibly halt the forward movement of IS. But the greater problem is the absence of alternative political and ideological forces that can confront IS on the ideological turf and challenge its sickening brutality and indulge in politics of inclusion and fair play.

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