

ISIS: The Killing of Al-Baghdadi [UPSC Notes]

Introduction

"Terrorism is a challenge for mankind, not just any one country or region. Those who believe in humanity should join together to tackle terrorism."

-Narendra Modi (Brussels speech, 2016)

The above statement by the Indian Prime Minister holds equally relevant in the contemporary scenario where terrorism has become an existential threat to mankind, as it can be seen that millions of lives have been lost, and social instability has been created amongst communities throughout the world especially in some regions in the last few decades.

Context

While terrorism is widely distributed geographically, most events are concentrated in a small number of countries committed by an array of groups; and disproportionately affecting Muslim populations. Although there have been many groups and organisations that have been actively propagating fundamentalist ideals, the apocalyptic rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria under the leadership of Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi made terrorism an invincible challenge for authorities and nation-states all across the globe.

However, the **killing of Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi, by US Delta Forces**, near Idlib province of Syria is a significant blow to the world's most fearsome terrorist group.

There had been several attempts by the United States and other nations in the region like Russia, Iran, Syria, and Israel among others to eliminate Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi, but his disguising ability and safe havens provided by the topography and non-state actors of the subcontinent gave him an upper hand. Nevertheless, following years of efforts and intelligence gathering by several ground-level cadres, the American forces were able to kill him.

Background:

ISIS started as an Al-Qaeda splinter group, also called the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria or Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIL). The ISIS aimed to create an Islamic state called a caliphate across Iraq, Syria and beyond. The group implements Sharia Law, to establish a society that mirrors the region's ancient past. ISIS is known for killing thousands of people and carrying out public executions, crucifixions and other acts.

Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi and his group became directly involved in ISIL's atrocities and human rights violations. These include the genocide of Yazidis in Iraq, extensive sexual slavery, organized rape, floggings, and systematic executions. He directed terrorist activities and massacres. He embraced brutality as part of the organization's propaganda efforts, producing videos displaying sexual slavery and executions via hacking, stoning, and burning. In 2014, ISIL announced the establishment of a worldwide caliphate. Al-Baghdadi was named its caliph, to be known as "Caliph Ibrahim," and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant was renamed the Islamic State (IS).



ISIS: Under Baghdadi

From the beginning, ISIS took considerable security measures to obscure Baghdadi's identity. Within the organisation, even high-level leadership rarely saw Baghdadi in person; even in such rare instances, he appeared with his face covered—practices that partially account for his nickname “the Ghost.” Moreover, ISIS propaganda deliberately downplayed the figurehead of Baghdadi—unlike much of al-Qaeda's communications, in which the publicity-hungry leader serves as the charismatic face of the organizational cause.

Al Baghdadi had a charismatic appeal amongst his followers. He united several splinter groups in the Middle East in order to expand the reach and manpower of his organisation. Under his leadership and guidance, the ISIS rose to prominence as the transnational terror organisation prompting the United Nations to designate him as a global terrorist.

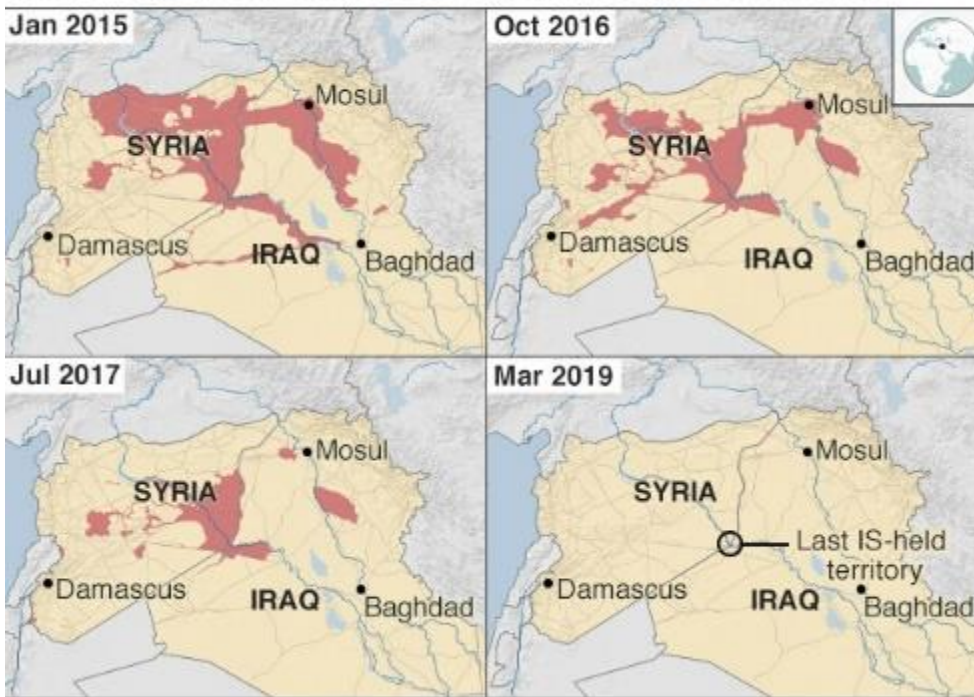
The tactical modes of action taken by ISIS under Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi were;

- Serial bombings carried out at prominent and strategic places like embassies in Iraq, Afghanistan, etc.
- Radicalisation of the youth to recruit them into ISIS ranks in which Al Baghdadi played a crucial role as a sermon giver and preacher of fundamentalism.
- In the areas under its control, IS implemented an extreme interpretation of Islamic law that terrorised residents. Women accused of adultery were stoned to death, thieves had their hands amputated, and those accused of opposing IS rule were beheaded or crucified.
- The group sparked global outrage by destroying many of the region's most famous archaeological sites, from the Syrian desert city of Palmyra to the Assyrian capital of Nimrud in Iraq, and looting artefacts from museums.
- Under Al Baghdadi's control, attacks in other countries also began to take place through IS terrorists or individuals it inspired. Such attacks included the downing of a Russian airliner over Egypt's Sinai Peninsula in October 2015, the Paris attacks and the Sri Lanka suicide bombings in April 2019.
- The use of technology through cyber warfare (snooping, phishing, among others), cyber radicalisation, etc.
- 'Lone Wolf' Attacks (A lone actor, lone-actor terrorist, or lone wolf is someone who prepares and commits violent acts alone, outside of any command structure and without material assistance from any group. They may be influenced or motivated by the ideology), carried out by Islamic State were a new mode of its dominance across the world that had occurred in several countries like Australia,

France, Belgium, Bangladesh, etc.

However, stern actions by several nations especially the USA and other western countries and resilience shown by nations like India towards ISIS ideology and influence have led to its downfall. Moreover, the united front presented by countries in West Asia and the rallying of several armed groups comprising Kurdish militias and Syrian Democratic Forces against Islamic State resulted in its territorial and ideological waning.

How the area under IS control has shrunk



Impact of Baghdadi's death on the subcontinent

Although it has been touted that with the end of Baghdadi, the Caliphate and the domination of ISIS would come to an end, there are also counter claims that it may give rise to new successors to the ISIS movement. Nevertheless, multifarious impacts could occur as a result of his death.

- After confirmation of Baghdadi's death, it has become quite evident that one of the world's most wanted terrorists has been brought to justice.
- It may not mark an end for the group as it has already spread its ideological wings far off into the subcontinent's remotest areas, with many sub-regional leaders emerging, however, there are chances that a vacuum in the top leadership of ISIS may affect its command structure at the apex level.
- The killing has strengthened the belief of nations in the region that perpetrators of crime against humanity will be brought to books if all nation-states cooperate together and become tactically sound.
- ISIS has in recent years lost most of its territory and support in the West Asian region and Baghdadi's death may further weaken its organisational hold over West Asian territory as it would be difficult to find his replacement and successor of his calibre and commitment.
- It may also put commanders of several terrorist organisations in the subcontinent on the backfoot, as they may fear a similar end at the hands of the US or other countries.

Challenges

- It's good to take out the leader, but it's not just a terrorist group —it's an ideology as well; stamping

out the idea of the Islamic State will prove to be much more difficult than one successful military/intelligence operation.

- Nations across the world need to watch out for any kind of retaliation and vengeful actions in their territories as alerts have been sounded in many countries of the ISIS. The U.S., the Kurdish rebels, the Syrian government and other stakeholders in the region should be mindful of the geopolitical and sectarian minefields that groups such as the IS could exploit for their re-emergence.
- The withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria, the distrust of Turkey towards the rapid rise of the Syrian Kurds (who are organisationally and ideologically aligned with Kurdish rebels on the Turkish side) and the Syrian regime's intent to re-establish its authority over the Kurdish autonomous region in the northeast, may throw the region into chaos again, which would suit the ISIS fighters.
- In many ways despite the death of its dreaded emir, the group is already evolving. ISIS leadership ranks have proved resilient despite more than five years of war. The group has been quick to adapt to new circumstances and new enemies in the face of several challenges and defeats. No longer capable of seizing and holding territory, the surviving foot soldiers have instead gone back to their guerrilla roots, carrying out ambushes, bombings and assassinations. And despite the loss of its territorial caliphate in Iraq and Syria, ISIS has expanded its reach to include 14 separate affiliates in countries across Asia and Africa.

Way forward

- Thus, there is a need to find political solutions to the civil wars going on in the West Asian and North Africa (WANA) region. Moreover, diligent effort should be made to counter the ideological battle of ISIS and facilitate the movement of youth, especially in war-torn regions away from the ISIS sphere of influence.
- Time has come to recognise and ratify the COMPREHENSIVE CONVENTION ON INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM (CCIT) proposed by INDIA which would act as a potent tool to counter and dismantle terrorism throughout the world.

Conclusion:-

- There are strong chances of ISIS's influence getting reduced after Baghdadi's death but on the contrary, ground realities also show that the roots and tentacles of ISIS have spread to the remotest and most distant places on the subcontinent as far as southeast Asian nations like the Philippines, Myanmar, etc.
- Moreover, the hierarchical structure of ISIS and decentralised nature of functioning via the use of technology like cyber terrorism, ideological radicalisation, 'lone wolf' attacks in many nations like India, Bangladesh, as well as ISIS capabilities of exploiting the loopholes and luring youth from disturbed regions like Kashmir and Afghanistan proves its fatal nature.
- The caliphate may be weakened after Baghdadi but he created a resilient bureaucratic organisation that could withstand the loss of leaders.
- The root of the problem should be tackled by way of countering ISIS ideology and killing terrorism rather than a targeted approach of killing the terrorist.

