

# The new jihadist threat

Across West Asia, the old bonds of tribe and creed are causing states to unravel

ILLUSTRATION BY AJAY MOHANTY



When I was a young lecturer at the University of Oxford's Christ Church, the eminent British historian Hugh Trevor-Roper befriended me. In one of our conversations, on being asked who, in his judgement, were the greatest historians (and books), he replied: Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and Ibn Khaldun's *The Muqaddimah*. These works have been on my bookshelf ever since. Rereading Khaldun is of help in understanding the latest form that the jihadist threat is taking.

Given the stunning military success of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in those two countries, the continuing turmoil caused by Boko Haram in Nigeria and Mali and by Al-Shabab in Kenya, and the emergence of the Pakistani Taliban as an existential threat to that country, these and other countries face a new, more brutal and atavistic form of jihadist assault compared to the almost balletic destruction of New York's World Trade Centre towers by the planes flown by Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda hijackers. Khaldun would recognise these new jihadists as the successors of the tribal warriors, with the nomadic kinship ties called *asabiyyah*, which he eulogised.

He saw that West Asia was sandwiched between the two great domains of pastoralist nomadism: the steppes to the north and the Arabian desert in the south. His macro history of Islamic polity saw history as punctuated by dynastic cycles linked to tribal conquest. His is a world of dynamic interaction between the barbarian nomadic pastoralists and the sedentary civilisations of the cities. Every now and then, *asabiyyah* throws up a tribe with enough warriors to conquer the cities of the sedentary civilisations and found a dynasty. But, in time, the luxurious temptations of civilisation sap the moral fibre and the *asabiyyah* of the dynasty. With its growing appetite for the fruits of the city, the tribal dynasty bears down

harder on the sedentary civilisation by raising the burden of taxation, and, as its members lose their initial fighting vigour, dependent outsiders are introduced to shore up the dynasty. They or some other tribal group eventually take over, making use of the discontent that the increased burden of taxation has caused among the sedentary population.

The Ottoman Empire had kept a lid on this cycle and provided 600 years of stability to the region under the Ottoman state and its various offshoots. But after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the peace imposed by the Treaty of Versailles, the young Field Marshal Archibald Wavell observed: "After 'the war to end all war' they seem to have been pretty successful in Paris at making a 'peace to end all peace.'" The post-World War One settlement consisted of the League of Nations mandate enforcing the Sykes-Picot agreement, which gave the French a mandate covering Syria and Lebanon; and a British mandate over a truncated Palestine incorporating the flawed Balfour Declaration, and British-controlled states created for the Hashemite princes of Iraq and Transjordan. The Kurds, who had been promised their own country by then-US President Woodrow Wilson, never got their Kurdistan, from which the successor states of Turkey, Syria, Iraq



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and Iran were later carved out. The subsequent history of the unravelling of this new order need not concern us (but see the excellent history of the creation of the modern West Asia: *A Peace to End All Peace*, by David Fromkin), except to note that with the Ba'athist coups in Syria and Iraq and Muammar Gaddafi's in Libya, these new authoritarian rulers had succeeded in keeping a lid on the potential challenges from the tribal warriors in their respective regions.

The Iraq war and its flawed denouement till the "surge" in 2007 also reopened the ancient fault line in Islam that goes back to the Battle of Karbala. With the Sunnis subsequently controlling much of the Arab

Middle East and the Shias in Iran, the downfall of Saddam Hussein led to the empowerment of the Shias in a major Arab state. The Sunni insurgency was put down by American arms, and a new democratic Iraqi state with power sharing among the Shias, Sunnis and the Kurds was created. However, with Barack Obama's decision to remove US forces from Iraq in 2011, and the installation of the sectarian Nouri al-Maliki as the head of the Iraqi government, this post-invasion Iraq is also unravelling.

In Syria, the sectarian civil war between the Alawite Bashar al-Assad regime and various Sunni factions has led to the country's implosion, with ISIS gaining the upper hand and effectively detaching large parts of eastern Syria for its new caliphate. They have now spilled over into the Sunni regions of Iraq, echoing Khaldun's nomadic tribal attacks on sedentary civilisations. Meanwhile, the Kurds have grabbed Kirkuk, and, in effect, created an autonomous Kurdistan in Iraq. Now that the Kurds in Syria have also broken away, if those in Turkey can come to some sort of arrangement with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan in support of his bid for the Turkish presidency, the Kurds will probably get the state that they were denied at Versailles. In Libya, the deposition of Gaddafi and the failure of the successor government to establish its authority over their nominal state have reignited the old Ibn Khaldun cycle, with tribal warriors spilling over not only into Libya but also into northern Nigeria and Mali.

Closer to home, the tribal warriors of the badlands of the North-West Frontier Province are now threatening the integrity of Pakistan. This is deeply ironic — for, Pakistan, as a successor state of the British Raj, had followed the policy established by Lord Curzon when he was viceroy, until the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) decided to use them as asymmetric proxy warriors. He had withdrawn British Indian troops from the fortifications on the Durand line and replaced them with tribal levies to police their own territory and "after the roads and passes which it is necessary for us to keep open, to pay him and humour him when he behaves, but to lay him out when he does not" (*Curzon: Imperial Statesman*, by David Gilmour). But the ISI turned the Pathan warriors into the Taliban to fight the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, which has now mutated into the Pakistani Taliban seeking to overthrow the Pakistani state.

All this disorder flows from a number of flawed decisions taken by the current US president. Once Iraq had been pacified by the surge, it was a mistake to remove all US troops from Iraq. As an imperial power, the US could have maintained order in West Asia by its hard-fought-for military presence, for which — as the preceding British imperial rulers had demonstrated — only a small force with recognised overwhelming military power would have sufficed. Similarly, announcing a predetermined date for a withdrawal from Afghanistan has opened up the grave possibility of disorder in the AfPak region. For, in the geopolitical game — much like in poker — one never shows one's hand; and, even more, if one draws "red lines", one does not show they are written on sand. With Mr Obama's disastrous renunciation of the use of the US' military muscle, the world is faced with the prospect of serious disorder, which will gravely endanger India's security.