

# Three points of the Triangle: Islamic State, Britain, Indian subcontinent



Paul Stott

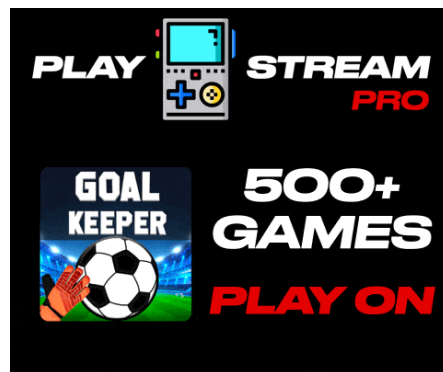
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**London:** The Islamic State is down, but not necessarily out. Last month the United Nations World Food Programme expressed concern about the spread of malnutrition in the Cabo Delgado territory of Mozambique, where the Islamic State Central African Province (IS-CAP) has been involved in sustained fighting against government soldiers and mercenaries. Some 300,000 civilians have fled. However, if Islamic State is to become once more a spectre haunting the world, it is territories at the heart of Islam, rather than its peripheries, that will be of critical importance. That means the Middle East, and for reasons of history and religious intensity, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

To understand its failure, it is worth recapping on the scale of the Islamic State's ambitions. In 2014, it envisaged a future caliphate covering North Africa, the entirety of the Middle East, and swathes of southern Europe. Its proposed Khorasan territory would cover the Indian subcontinent, plus parts of China and central Asia. Whilst such ambitions are shared in part or whole by gradualist manifestations of political Islam such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hizb-ut-Tahrir, and discreetly held by more Muslims than is sometimes acknowledged, the Islamic State did something different. The 2014 declaration of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi of the restoration of the Caliphate, with himself as Caliph, began a process of building the Caliphate rather than talking about it. And it asked the world's Sunni Muslims to rally to what was being initially established in Syria and Iraq.

Few heeded this call to actually existing sharia. Many jihadist groups in situ preferred to continue with their own armed struggles against the “near enemy”. In a crowded marketplace, the researcher Abdul Basit found only six jihadist groups in the Af-Pak region to either pledge allegiance to Al Baghdadi, or to develop working relations with the IS. Approximately, 1,000 Britons travelled out of a Muslim population of some 3 million travelled to Syria, although not all joined the IS. Others preferred to launch their jihad in the UK itself, carrying out atrocities including the bombing of the 2017 Ariana Grande concert at the Manchester Arena. The travel of British jihadis to other conflict zones also continued, with Somalia, Pakistan and Afghanistan destinations of choice.

In 2013, a dual national British-Pakistani, Muhammad Aftab Suleman joined an aid convoy from Britain to Syria, before departing for Islamabad, where he established a production studio for extremist propaganda. Returning to the UK he was subsequently arrested for possessing material likely to be of use to a person preparing an act of terrorism. Shortly after his parents declared his innocence to the *Manchester Evening News*, Suleman pleaded guilty and was jailed for five years. Hamayun Tariq made a similar journey, but via different ends of the triangle. He left Dudley in the West Midlands to fight in Waziristan from 2012-2014, before heading to Syria. There his social media claimed he was working for IS as a bomb-maker. When then Home Secretary Theresa May revoked his British passport, he took to Twitter to sarcastically thank her. His current whereabouts are unknown.

By 2017, the UK had revoked over 150 citizenships of dual nationals. Following the furore over Shamima Begum, one of three schoolgirls from east London, who travelled to join a school friend in Islamic State and to marry IS fighters, the government was asked to provide an updated figure. It is yet to do so. It is likely many of those have citizenship of countries in the Indian sub-continent, primarily Pakistan and Bangladesh. Where fighters, and their families, who survived the collapse of the caliphate go next, is unclear. Britain as a country gains nothing from their return.

A similar lack of clarity surrounds a conveyor belt for British fighters—the group best known as Al-Muhajiroun, led by Anjem Choudary, a former solicitor jailed in 2016 for encouraging support for IS. Several of his best-known associates, such as Siddhartha Dhar and Mohammed Reza Haque, were reportedly killed in Syria. Others in their orbit like Khurram Butt or Usman Khan, have died committing terrorist attacks in the UK. Some sought jihad in the Indian subcontinent—in 2013 Dr Mirza Tariq Ali left Al-Muhajiroun to return to his native Pakistan, where in 2014 he was recorded in a Taliban video calling on others to follow his path. The next year he was killed by the Pakistani military. Outside of the armed groups in Northern Ireland, Al-Muhajiroun has been the most significant terrorist current to emerge in the United Kingdom. But it has been the group’s message, and the tendency of those who come into contact with it to turn to violence, more than any strategic plan of action, that has proved so appealing to certain Islamists. Today, with many of its activists dead, and others well known to the security services and largely in middle age, its prospects appear weak. However, the history and nature of British jihadism should require us to respond to such developments by asking “What next?” rather than dismissively declaring “whatever”. And we should say much the same about Islamic State, be it in far off Mozambique, or camps in Syria. We are unlikely to have heard the last of the triangle between the Islamic State, Britain and the Indian subcontinent.

*Dr Paul Stott is a writer and commentator in the United Kingdom. This article is based on a presentation given at a side meeting of the UN Human Rights Council on 29 September for the European Foundation of South Asian Studies, [www.efsas.org](http://www.efsas.org)*