

The Spread of the Islamic State in Southern Asia: Between Vision and Reality

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Background

In recent decades, South Asia has been a key battlefield for regional and global jihadist organizations. The war in Afghanistan in the 1980s between the mujahidin and the Soviet Union marked a turning point in the spread of global terrorist groups, built around the cross-border commitment to the jihadist cause by Muslims of various nations. After the war, two prominent organizations representing two central ideologies of radical Islam established themselves in Afghanistan: al-Qaeda, which bore the standard of global jihad against a US-led West, and the Taliban, which aimed to institute an Islamic emirate in Afghanistan. Before long, their influence spread throughout the region, especially in neighboring Pakistan, which was drawn into escalating warfare against Islamic terrorism. Embroiled in a longstanding conflict with Pakistan, India too has had to confront the ramifications of Islamic terrorism in the region.

The Islamic State's entry into the South Asia arena in 2014 coincided with political violence in Afghanistan, which intensified as US and NATO forces scaled back their involvement in the country, and as Afghanistan and Pakistan – both engaged in internal political struggles – grew increasingly incapable of stemming the rising tide of Islamic terrorism. Taking advantage of the situation, the Islamic State, which had originally drawn its inspiration from al-Qaeda's global jihadism and for a time had even served as that organization's extension in Iraq, severed the alliance to become its rival.

This essay surveys the Islamic State's penetration of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India, and examines the ensuing threat to the area's dominant movements that until recently had been partners in jihad. It also outlines the Islamic

State's vision for expansion throughout South Asia as well as the practical limitations of that vision, while analyzing the ramifications of the struggles among the various actors in the terrorism arena.

The Afghan Arena: The Taliban versus the Islamic State

The first signs of the Islamic State's intention to spread to Afghanistan emerged in the second half of 2014, a few months after the Iraqi city of Mosul fell to the Islamic State. The Islamic State's independence, brutality, and expansionist ambitions were seen as a threat by dominant Sunni movements in Afghanistan. The leaders of the Afghan Taliban thus rushed to swear an oath of allegiance to Mullah Muhammad Omar (whose death was not yet common knowledge),¹ insisting that the war against the United States and its allies had to be conducted under a single authority, i.e., the Taliban.² This was the earliest evidence of the power struggle between the Taliban and the Islamic State – the result of the latter's challenge to the older organization on three key issues: control of the Afghan arena, ideology, and control of the Islamic struggle as a whole.

On the practical level, the rivalry between the Afghan Taliban and the Islamic State revolved around their struggle over the control and recruitment of fighters. In early 2015, a few months after the Islamic State made its first appearance in Afghanistan, a local Taliban leader deserted and opened an Islamic State training camp in Farah Province. Afterwards, jihadists began flying the black Islamic State flag in other Afghan provinces, though whether this was the result of official Islamic State policy is unclear. Mutual negative propaganda has played a role in the battle for loyalty and active support. In June 2015, for example, a spokesman for the Islamic State accused the Afghan Taliban of serving as an agent in the Pakistani intelligence service.

In his attempt to avoid clashes between the two organizations, the deputy chief of the Taliban asked Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State, to operate in Afghanistan under the Taliban's leadership. The Islamic State, however, refused subservience to any other entity. Armed confrontations soon broke out between the Taliban and the Islamic State in Nangarhar, Helmand, and Farah;³ in April 2015 each declared jihad against its opponent.

The Taliban and the Islamic State share an ideological platform. Like the Islamic State, the Taliban wants to make *sharia* the law of the land, and it ruthlessly enforced strict Islamic rulings when it ruled Afghanistan in the 1990s. Moreover, like its current rival, the Taliban has attacked the Shiite

minority, destroyed historic temples and sites, and treated anyone it viewed as an enemy of Islam with brutality. Nonetheless, ideological differences exist between the two. The Taliban has established an Islamic emirate in Afghanistan that is based on a combination of Hanafi Sunni Islamic Law and the Pashtunwali, an unwritten Pashtun code of ethics and traditional life.⁴ The puritan and uncompromising Islamic State, on the other hand, rejects any integration of Islamic law and cultural codes, and promotes a global Islamic caliphate, which al-Baghdadi announced in mid-2014. The Islamic State also aims at far greater territorial expansion than the Taliban ever envisioned. In addition, the brutality that has become a trademark of the Islamic State far exceeds Taliban tactics, and the Islamic State's rejection of any cooperation with all those deemed enemies of Islam leads it to condemn the Taliban's willingness to cooperate with the Pakistani intelligence service and engage in talks with both the United States and the Afghan government.

Such ideological differences between the Taliban and the Islamic State, however, are mostly window-dressing that conceals personal power struggles and competition over leadership. Prominent jihadist organizations, including al-Qaeda – under both Osama Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri – have long regarded Mullah Omar as their supreme leader. However, once al-Baghdadi declared himself caliph of the Islamic State, he openly challenged the status of Omar, the “emir of the believers.” Since then, rivalry has led to hostile declarations that have at times assumed a personal tone. In April 2015, for example, a Taliban spokesman referred to al-Baghdadi as a “false caliph,” and claimed that loyalty to him was forbidden by Islamic law. In turn, al-Baghdadi responded by calling Mullah Omar an “illiterate warlord.”⁵

The Islamic State's entry into the Afghan arena has significant implications, both on a regional and global level. The Taliban is securely entrenched in the local population, especially among the Pashtuns in the south. Assessments of the Islamic State in Afghanistan reveal that it is still a minor power, attracting mostly foreigners and Taliban deserters. Nonetheless, the extreme brutality of the organization has damaged the delicate fabric of Taliban relations with the local population.⁶ The emergence of the Islamic State in Afghanistan thus complicates the situation and escalates the struggle over the country's future. To remain relevant, the Taliban must now commit itself to violent and persistent combat instead of engagement in dialogue with the Afghan government, a course that has thus far yielded no significant results.⁷ The announcement of Mullah Omar's death and the tug-of-war within the Taliban

over his replacement is also bound to undermine any attempts at peace talks with the regime.

From a broader international perspective, the Islamic State's spread to Afghanistan, which coincides with the departure of US and NATO troops from the country, has created some new and surprising bedfellows. Changing circumstances are driving the Taliban, a radical Sunni organization, into accepting assistance from Shiite Iran, something unthinkable only a few years ago. What began as financial aid has now extended to the recruitment, training, and armament of Taliban fighters. No one knows what will become of Afghanistan following the US withdrawal, but it seems that Iran has already bet on the Taliban.⁸ Cooperation between Iran and the Taliban, undoubtedly a matter of mutual convenience, aims to cut the United States out of the picture and disrupt the influence of the Islamic State – a challenge both to the Taliban and Iran – over the Afghan arena.

Khorasan Province: Pakistani Taliban Factions in Support of the Islamic State

While Afghanistan is the crown jewel of the South Asian jihad, it cannot remain isolated from the jihad in neighboring Pakistan. In fact, the border region, which is largely inhabited by Pashtun tribes, is one of the busiest centers of regional and international terrorist activity. Pakistan nurtured Afghanistan's Taliban in the madrassas that took in Afghani refugees during the war against the Soviet Union. In addition, dozens of Pakistani jihad organizations were established in the tribal area of Pakistan from the early 2000s, when the United States invaded Afghanistan, until 2007, when the Pakistan Taliban became the umbrella organization for the country's broad range of Islamist movements. The Taliban has operated and spread throughout Pakistan, enjoying cooperation with both its Afghan counterpart and al-Qaeda forces in the area. In late 2014, these groups were joined by the Islamic State, which cast its entrance into Pakistan as a natural continuation of its expansion throughout Afghanistan.

Although the Pakistani Taliban has its share of internal struggles and offshoots, it is solidly integrated into Pakistan's tribal areas, where its various branches do not pose a concrete threat to one another. However, the Islamic State's appearance in Pakistan disrupted this balance, destabilized power relations, and threatened the country's Taliban. Among the reactions to the Islamic State's entry into Pakistan was the attempt by the Taliban leaders

to join forces. In October 2014, Abu Omar Maqbool, the spokesman for the Pakistani Taliban, declared his loyalty to al-Baghdadi; the leaders of five other organizations joined him. In response, Mullah Fazlullah, the emir of the Pakistani Taliban, immediately announced that Maqbool was no longer the organization's spokesman and confirmed the Pakistani Taliban's oath of loyalty to Mullah Omar. A month later, Jundallah, an organization affiliated with the Pakistani Taliban, swore allegiance to the caliphate, while its leaders declared their loyalty to al-Baghdadi.

It is not inconceivable that the defection of senior Taliban personnel to the Islamic State has been partly motivated by bribery as well as by the disappearance of Mullah Omar, who was not seen in public since 2001. Those who left the Pakistani Taliban have founded the Khorashan Province in order to control the Islamic State in Pakistan. Khorashan is a geographical region that has historically included Afghanistan, Pakistan, and parts of neighboring nations. Although the Islamic State has attained only limited power and control in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the declaration of the province offers further evidence of its expansionist ambitions and serious intent.

Al-Qaeda toward the Islamic State: From Patron to Bitter Enemy

Osama Bin Laden linked the fate of his organization to the Taliban under the rule of Mullah Omar, who hosted him and granted his men refuge in his country. Nonetheless, al-Qaeda is ideologically closer to the Islamic State than any other Salafist jihadist organization. Indeed, the two actually collaborated in the past. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the founder of the Islamic State, for example, made a pact with al-Qaeda and turned his organization into al-Qaeda's proxy in Iraq from 2004 until 2013. However, like the Taliban, al-Qaeda has opposed the Islamic State's expansion under al-Baghdadi. In Iraq, the Islamic State's growing power, accompanied by horrendous displays of violence against all – fighters and civilians, locals and foreigners – has prompted al-Qaeda to express its reservations very clearly. The split between the patron and its emissary in Iraq was officially announced in February 2014, when the Islamic State threatened al-Qaeda's status within the global jihad movement.

It is therefore not surprising that al-Qaeda has joined the Taliban's aggressive fight against the Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Entering the struggle over control of South Asia, al-Qaeda leader al-Zawahiri actually announced the establishment of an al-Qaeda umbrella organization

on the Indian subcontinent – AQIS. Cooperation in Afghanistan and Pakistan between the two veteran organizations, the Taliban and al-Qaeda, is likely to make it very difficult for the Islamic State to realize its hopes of expansion and growth in these areas.

India: An Inseparable Part of the Caliphate

While the Islamist discourse gains hold in the Muslim nations in South Asia, India, with a substantial Muslim minority of 177 million people, remains an enigma. Muslims in India are historically and often ethnically linked to those in Pakistan. Nonetheless, radical Muslim organizations operating in India outside the conflict zone of Kashmir are of relatively limited scope. Estimates on the numbers joining the ranks of global jihad indicate that very few volunteers come from India. At the same time, India has a long history of radical Islam. The Deobandi sect, for example, which provides the ideological basis of some of the most radical organizations in South Asia, has its roots in India.⁹ The country's encounter with Islamic terrorism, which has largely been linked to its conflict with Pakistan, began with the war that the latter has been waging on India through the proxies of its various terrorist organizations.

The doctrine of global jihad and the notion of the caliphate are forcing the Islamic State to test the limits of its vision and operative goals. India, a strategic target in Osama Bin Laden's holy war, has become a target of the Islamic State as well, at least on a rhetorical level. In a speech announcing the caliphate, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi made reference to India three times. Like Bin Laden, he sees India as an enemy state that oppresses Muslims, but emphasizes its natural place within the Islamic caliphate.¹⁰

A document in Urdu, captured in the tribal region of Pakistan, sheds further light on the Islamic State's vision as it describes a working program for uniting dozens of factions of the region's jihadist organizations into a single entity that will attack India in order to touch off an apocalyptic confrontation with the United States.¹¹ Yet though the document offers evidence of grandiose ambitions, it says nothing at all about real capabilities. In fact, the presence of the Islamic State in India is currently limited to sporadic associations between individuals and local groups that vary in their behavior. Expressions of sympathy appear primarily in social media. However, even if the Islamic State's hold on India is insubstantial and far

from what the Islamic State would like, the inherent threat of its influence on this vast and complex nation cannot be ignored.

Conclusion

The activity of the Islamic State and the rhetoric of its leadership leave no doubt as to its expansionist vision, as well as its desire to make South Asia a significant part of the caliphate. While the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan stagger under the burden of combating the older jihadist organizations that have settled in their countries, it seems that the main effort to stop the Islamic State is being shouldered by dominant organizations in the region, i.e., the Taliban and al-Qaeda. These two are openly expressing their concern over the Islamic State's inroads into South Asia and are engaging in both propaganda and military warfare in order to preserve their dominance in the regional and global jihadist movement.

The Islamic State's hold on South Asia is far weaker than its vision. Nonetheless, its entry in the region has enhanced Salafist jihadist ideology and made the arena more complex and violent than before. As the international community has learned in the last couple of decades, such developments may well lead to further radicalization, even in countries where the Islamic State lacks significant power. The international effort to stop the Islamic State in its principal loci of power, Iraq and Syria, must therefore be swifter and more decisive than it has been so that it may stop it before it takes permanent root in the seething jihadist arenas of South Asia.

Notes

- 1 In July 2015, the Afghani government issued a statement on the death of Mullah Omar, which seems to have already occurred in 2013. Sources in the Afghani Taliban confirmed the statement, and Akhtar Mansour, Omar's deputy, was named the organization's new leader.
- 2 Sharifi Najib, "ISIS Makes Inroads in Afghanistan, Pakistan," *Foreign Policy*, October 1, 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/10/01/isis-makes-inroads-in-afghanistan-pakistan/>.
- 3 Bill Roggio, "Pakistani Taliban Confirms Death of Khorasan Province Spokesman," *Long War Journal*, July 14, 2015, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/07/pakistani-taliban-confirms-death-of-khorasan-province-spokesman-calls-for-afghan-taliban-and-islamic-state-to-end-their-dispute.php>.
- 4 Meirav Mishali-Ram, "When Ethnicity and Religion Meet: Kinship Ties and Cross-Border Dynamics in the Afghan-Pakistani Conflict Zone," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 17 (2011): 1-19.

- 5 “Taliban Leader: Allegiance to ISIS ‘Haram,’” *Rudaw Middle East*, April 13, 2015, <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/130420151>.
- 6 Talha Ibrahim, “Islamic State, Afghanistan and Pakistan!!” Centre for Strategic Research and Analysis – CESRAN, February 25, 2015, <http://cesran.org/islamic-state-afghanistan-and-pakistan.html>.
- 7 Vanda Felbab-Brown, “Blood and Hope in Afghanistan: A June 2015 Update,” Brookings, May 26, 2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2015/05/26-isis-taliban-afghanistan-felbabbrown>.
- 8 Margherita Stancati, “Iran Backs Taliban with Cash and Arms,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 11, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-backs-taliban-with-cash-and-arms-1434065528>.
- 9 “Jihadi Recruitment and Return: Asian Threat and Response,” Middle East Institute, January 16, 2015, <http://www.mei.edu/content/map/jihadi-recruitment-and-return-asian-threat-and-response>.
- 10 Christine C. Fair, “Is Pakistan in ISIS’ Crosshairs?” *Boston Review*, October 16, 2014, <http://bostonreview.net/world/c-christine-fair-isis-pakistan-militant-foreign-policy>.
- 11 Sara A. Carter, “Islamic State Recruitment Document Seeks to Provoke ‘End of the World,’” American Media Institute, July 28, 2015, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2015/07/28/ami-isil-document-pakistan-threatens-india/30674099>.