

IS and AQ Inroads in Pakistan and Future Implications

Farhan Zahid

Introduction

Despite much havoc in Middle East during last five years, the South Asian theatre of Global War on Terror (GWOT) has remained at a crossroads. It is because of two essential reasons. Firstly, a plethora of Islamist terrorist groups still operating and perpetrating acts of terrorism and secondly coupled with it the country continues to be of pivotal importance for global, regional and local Islamist terrorist groups because of its rich *jihadi* landscape. Simply put the importance of Pakistan in terms of growth, presence, and existing strengths of jihadist cadres continue to persist.

According to official figures, currently a total of 71 terrorist organizations operate in the country (Proscribed organizations' list)¹ and most of these are Islamist terrorist groups of varied range from global, regional, sectarian, *jihadist*-Kashmiri, caliphlists, *jihadist*-Afghani, and anti-Iranian *jihadist* groups. Despite its global nature, Pakistan remains at the center stage of global *jihad* movement. Torch bearers of *jihadist* movement Al-Qaeda was born in Pakistan in 1989, whereas founders of Al-Qaeda splinter, Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS), Abu Musab al-Zaraqawi and Abu Mohammad al-Maqdisi, had spent times in Pakistan-Afghanistan region during early 1990s. Hizb ut Tahrir (HT), another global Islamist group, has some presence in urban centers and academic institutions of Pakistan and HT time and again attempts to infiltrate Pakistani security institutions. Hence, the region remains fertile for recruitment and gaining influence for global Islamist terrorist groups. Pakistan's western neighbour

¹ NACTA. "List of Proscribed Terrorist Organizations in Pakistan", *National Counter Terrorism Authority*, <https://nacta.gov.pk/proscribed-organizations/>.

afghanistan is battling a wide array of Islamist terrorist groups, some having influence in Pakistan as well.

In view of the existing situation the article aims to analyze the current status of Al-Qaeda and ISIS branches and the inroads they intend to develop in the region and the conditions under which these groups might strengthen and continue to benefit from the rich *jihadi* landscape of Pakistan; and finally the article would draw attention towards implications amid the current situation.

Al-Qaeda and Islamic State making inroads in Pakistan

The rich *jihadi* landscape of Pakistan offers global as well as regional groups a lucrative prospect. Pakistan is of paramount importance for Al-Qaeda-Central (AQ-C) as it operates from Pakistan-Afghanistan region along with its various subsidiaries. Similarly IS-Central

(IS-C) is also keen to establish its base of operations, recruit and gain influence in Pakistan. Both ISIS and Al-Qaeda have been vying for stewardship of global *jihadism*, well inside Pakistan and attempting to make further inroads. Both global Islamist terrorist groups have been able to spread their tentacles and develop a network of franchises in Pakistan.

Al-Qaeda attempted to stay afloat in Pakistan after the rise of its splinter ISIS in June 2014 with the fall of Mosul city and the subsequent proclamation of Islamic Caliphate. With its long presence and influence among Pakistan Islamist terrorist groups the AQ-C appeared worried with the surfacing of IS-*Khorasan* and since then the AQ-C has been endeavouring to renew, strengthen and bolster its position in Pakistan. In order to do so, AQ-C launched its South Asia Chapter, the Al-Qaeda in the

Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) in September 2014. Apart from this initiative Al-Qaeda also recognized a local group Jamaat Ansar al-Sharia Pakistan (JASP) as its affiliates. The JASP remained involved in number of terrorist attacks in Karachi involved in killing of police officers and workers of overtly secular political parties like Muthada Qaumi Movement (MQM).

The AQIS was AQ-C's response to IS-C after it launched its local chapter IS-K in July 2014. The Al-Qaeda Emir, Ayman al-Zawahiri, himself appeared in a video introducing Asim Umar, a veteran *jihadi* of Indian origin. The two vowed to strike terror in South Asia.

The AQ-C's rationale was to reinvigorate itself and avoid giving space to IS-K to gain ground from the *jihadi* landscape of Pakistan. Simply put AQ-C sends a stay-away message to IS-C from its home turf displaying its resolve to stay put and sustain its oldest and strongest network.

The Fall of AQIS

Despite its serious efforts to sustain its network and to compete with IS-K the AQIS has hitherto not been able to function and get desired results for Al-Qaeda. Its endeavors to make further inroads in Pakistan have not been very successful. The AQIS start was ambitious with attempted hijacking of Pakistan Navy frigate PNS Zulfiqar in September 2014 but it could not further its ambitions and several of its networks have been busted by law enforcement and security forces operations in Karachi. It rather suffered some major losses.

The losses resulted from sustained counter terrorism actions of Karachi police's Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) in the city. Some of the most-wanted AQIS terrorists were arrested by CTD Karachi and the

organization could not manage to launch a series of further attacks, though sporadic terrorist attacks were reported. In November 2018 AQIS Emir of Sindh province Umar Jalal Chandio alia Kathio was arrested from Karachi's Gulshan-e-Iqbal locality. Chandio inspired the terrorists involved in Safoora Goth incident in 2015. Another of its senior member Tahir Minhas was defected to IS-K. Chnadio was involved in masterminding the massacre of 47 members of Ismaili-Shia community near Safoora Goth in the suburbs of Karachi. Chandio's wife is also said to be an active member of AQIS¹. According to a senior police officer of Karachi police:

“Jalal was associated with Al Qaeda's Arab network while Haji Sahib (code name) was active in Karachi and the Wadh area of Balochistan where mainly Baloch youths were involved in kidnapping for ransom, terrorism and attacks on NATO forces' containers².”

Another major AQIS member Ahsan Mehsud alias Roshan was arrested from Karachi in March 2018. Mehsud was involved in planning to assassinate secular party Muttahada Qaumi Movement (MQM) leaders in order to create chaos in the city. He was also close to Safoora Goth incident mastermind in spite that it was an IS-K operation³. The AQIS operations in Afghanistan remain negligible but it continues to work under the umbrella of Afghan Taliban insurgents. The Emir of AQIS, Asim Umar, is also believed to be based in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan the US

¹ “AQIS ‘high profile’ militant held in Karachi”, *Dawn*, November 20, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1446665>.

² *Ibid*.

³ Imtiaz Ali, “‘Most wanted’ AQIS militant said to be close aide of Safoora carnage convicts arrested”, *Dawn*, March 2, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1392746>.

forces discovered and raided one of the biggest terrorist training camps of AQIS in Kandahar province in 2017.

In Afghanistan, AQIS remained active alongside Afghan Taliban but its performance level was abysmal. In one operation in Nimroz province the AQIS and Afghan Taliban militants killed a US serviceman Sgt. Leandro Jasso in November 2018, during a gun battle. The clash showcased AQIS presence in Afghanistan and it has become evident Al-Qaeda militants are embedded with Afghan Taliban-led insurgency. Despite its presence in Afghanistan and pledge of loyalty to Afghan Taliban, Al-Qaeda appears not to publicly advertise its presence in Afghanistan perhaps because of Afghan Taliban pressure as the Taliban delegations routinely hold peace talks with US government⁴.

Albeit all these losses, the Al-Qaeda's alliance with Afghan Taliban remains intact⁵. This is in fact a non-starter for any positive dialogue leading to conclusion. One gun battle with Afghan security forces in Ghazni, in March 2019, 31 AQIS fighters died fighting alongside Afghan Taliban forces⁶. This phenomenon and other collusions clearly indicate a high end cooperation between Al-Qaeda and Afghan Taliban.

⁴ Thomas Joscelyn, "US serviceman killed during battle with Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan", *Long War Journal*, Nov 27, 2018, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/11/us-service-member-killed-during-battle-with-al-qaeda-in-afghanistan.php>.

⁵ "Twenty-second report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities", UN report submitted to UN Security Council, *United Nations*, <https://undocs.org/S/2018/705>

⁶ Bill Roggio, "Afghan military kills 31 AQIS fighters in Ghazni", *Long War Journal*, March 31, 2019, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/03/afghan-military-kills-31-aqis-fighters-in-ghazni.php>.

IS-K's consistent attempts

On the other hand the IS-K, the local branch and so called Walayat-e-Khorasan of IS-C has been attempting to gain grounds in order to make inroads in Pakistan and Afghanistan during last five years. Initially the IS-K fared better and appeared to make inroads in the region. The IS-K was able to lure in support of local Pakistan Islamist terrorist groups and three Pakistani organizations, previously aligned with Al-Qaeda, namely Tehreek-e-Khilafat Pakistan, Jundullah and TTP (Shahidullah Faction) joined hands with IS-K and pledged allegiance to IS Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi⁷. Apart from these local groups the Afghanistan based Islamic Movement of Afghanistan (IMU) previously allied with AQ-C along with Uighur and Chechen jihadists in Afghanistan pledged allegiance to IS-K⁸. Since its surfacing in Pakistan the IS-K has claimed responsibility of 11 terrorist attacks with some terrorist attacks having fatalities rate as high as 149 fatalities.

With this start the IS-K was all set to gain from *jihadi* landscape of Pakistan. This came to a halt when four of its first Emirs were killed in US drone strike over a period of three years. Hafiz Saeed Khan Orakzai in July 2016, Abdul Haseeb Logari in April 2017, Abdul Sayed Bajuari in July 2017 and Abu Saad Erhabi (deputy Emir) in Aug 2018 were killed in consecutive counter terrorism campaigns of US and Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) in eastern provinces of Afghanistan.

⁷ Farhan Zahid, "Al-Qaeda's Future in Pakistan amid the rise of Islamic State", *Terrorism Monitor* 12, No. 20 (Oct 2014), <https://jamestown.org/program/al-qaedas-future-in-pakistan-amid-the-rise-of-islamic-state/>.

⁸ Merhat Sharipzhan, "IMU declares it is now part of the Islamic State", *Radio Free Europe*, Aug 6, 2015, <https://www.rferl.org/a/imu-islamic-state/27174567.html>.

The IS-K stabilized itself after Aslam Farooqi, a former militant of Pakistani Islamist terrorist group Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) was appointed Emir of *Khorasan* province in 2017. This development did not last long for IS-K as the *Walayat* got divided because of the increasing internal rifts between Pakistan-origin fighters and local Afghans and Central Asian *jihadis* part of IS-K. The latter did not trust Farooqi because of his past credential of LeT and formed their own faction under the leadership of Maovia Uzbeki while settling in northern provinces of Afghanistan. Amid this situation the IS-K has two active factions one based in eastern provinces (Nangarhar, Paktia, Paktika and Kunar) and the other one under Uzbeki is based in Balkh and Badakhshan provinces.

Despite these rifts and internal tensions the IS-K in Pakistan has hitherto remained upfront in perpetrating acts of terrorism in southern Sindh and Baluchistan provinces. Especially in impoverished and Afghanistan-neighbouring Baluchistan province the IS-K has been able to create havoc during last five years. In one recent suicide attack in Mastung district of Baluchistan, the IS-K killed 150 people during an election rally in July 2018. The election candidate Mir Siraj Raisani was also killed in the terrorist attack.⁹

Amid this situation, the Baluchistan police made a major breakthrough by killing Mufti Hidayatullah, the emir of IS-K in Balochistan in an encounter in Kalat district of Balochistan province on July 20, 2018. Two other IS-K

⁹ Syed Ali Shah, "Suicide bomber responsible for Mastung attack identified: CTD", *Dawn*, July 19, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1421124>.

militants were also killed¹⁰.

The IS-K presence in Sindh province was further thwarted by the arrest of three IS-K militants from Karachi in September 2018. According to the CTD Karachi official statement, the three Islamist terrorists were linked to broader IS-K's broader network in Pakistan and the suspects in custody were involved in generating funds by involving in target killings and kidnappings for ransom in Karachi. The CTD official further stated that four more suspects belonging to the same IS-K Karachi cell are still at large and claimed to have killed two IS-K commanders. The police also recovered Rs 10 million ransom money from their possession. According to police the IS-K cell members used to kidnap people from Karachi and had connections in Afghanistan as most of their victim's relatives received calls for ransom from Afghanistan¹¹.

Despite these setbacks, the IS-K is still attempting to capitalize the rich *jihadi* landscape of Pakistan. According to a senior counter terrorism department official of Sindh police, the IS-K is pursuing its recruitment drive in Sindh province especially in universities colleges of Karachi. He further said that the IS-K is involved in spreading its ideology through social media and through a network of Islamist individuals working in cells to introduce IS-K's message to local youth both men and women. The IS-K network in Karachi has been able to lure in a number of recruits and some of them even made their way to join IS-C ranks in Syria and Iraq whereas a number of them have travelled to IS-K strongholds in

¹⁰ Mohammad Zafar, "Security forces kill Islamic State Baluchistan chief in Kalat", *Express Tribune*, July 20, 2018, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1762901/1-security-forces-kill-islamic-state-balochistan-chief-kalat/>.

¹¹ "Three 'IS militants' arrested in Karachi", *Dawn*, September 13, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1432557>.

Afghanistan's eastern provinces and in Pakistan's Balochistan province where some districts such as Mastung experiencing IS-K's influx¹².

In last few years a number of cases have indicated that the IS-K has successfully recruited from radicalized young, urban, middleclass and educated youth in Karachi and other urban centers of Pakistan. Recent cases of business graduate Saad Aziz and his cell mates (involved in massacres of Ismaili-Shia community members), medical student Noreen Leghari who attempted to join IS-K as suicide bomber, and Bushra Cheema a radicalized Islamist woman who attempted to flee to Syria along with her family are indicative of growing IS-K network and showcased its persistent efforts to establish a base in Pakistan.

Future implications

Having suffered serious setbacks and losses both IS and Al-Qaeda could still cause serious implications in near future. Both are global terror entities with resources and broad agendas. With no counter violent extremist strategy in place to execute, Pakistan could face a resurgence of Islamist terrorism in upcoming years keeping in view of the withdrawal of US forces, collapse of order and tranquillity in Afghanistan, and regrouping of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) currently based in Pakistan-Afghanistan bordering regions. In case of a civil war in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of US forces, the Islamist terrorist groups could regroup.

The recent announcement of establishing of Walayat-e-Pakistan by IS's official Amaq Media on May 15 has indeed showcased IS's resolve to gain some ground in Pakistan amid all difficulties in developing a strong

¹² Sindh Police CTD official, interviewed by author.

network. It indicates that IS-K is hell-bent on making Pakistan one of its key post-Caliphate areas and part of strategic plan for relocation or developing strong network. The severe economic disparities and high level of unemployment in Pakistan needs no elaboration and coupled with a radicalized environment with a wide range of Islamist terrorist groups already functioning in almost every corner of the country in fact provides impetus to both Al-Qaeda and IS to broaden their network of affiliates and strengthen their core. The establishment of a separate Walayat is also alarming because IS-C appears to reinvigorate itself and for that it has chosen Pakistan as a strategic choice.

AQIS amid its several losses and not much substantial progress in terms of terrorism has hopes in shape of Afghan Taliban. On the eve Eid ul Fatar after the end of Ramzan the AQIS Emir Asim Umar issued a statement congratulating Afghan Taliban over the successes in defeating the ‘Americans’ despite their superior technological might. In the same statement Umar criticized IS and expressed full confidence in Afghan Taliban leadership¹³. This statement and Taliban reluctance of condemning Al-Qaeda regardless of talks with the US government negotiations team indicate that Afghan Taliban cannot be trusted and violence in the region is there to stay in Afghanistan. For Afghan Taliban abandoning Al-Qaeda may be a matter of ideological concerns but for Al-Qaeda tagging along Afghan Taliban is a matter of survival.

¹³ Thomas Joscelyn, “Senior Al-Qaeda official praises Taliban’s ‘victory’ in Afghanistan”, *Long War Journal*, June 13, 2019, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/06/senior-al-qaeda-official-praises-talibans-victory-in-afghanistan.php>.

Conclusion

Both Al-Qaeda and Islamic State have profound interests in South Asia in general and Pakistan in particular. Both have been trying hard to make further inroads notwithstanding difficulties. In recent times the security situation in Pakistan has slightly improved and Al-Qaeda and its regional allies are on the retreat whereas IS-K has achieved some successes in perpetrating mass casualty terrorist attacks in Pakistan. Much is still to be done as situation appears to be changing in neighboring Afghanistan. The growth of IS-K and AQIS are matters of concern and both organizations are linked with global terrorist groups. The withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan would be a crucial moment as that would be the time that these organizations would not be left with much further hindrance to grow. Both Pakistani and Afghan security successes are linked to US drone strikes and other counter terrorism measures. The case of IS-K is self-explanatory as it has not been able to stand on its feet comfortably because of continuous decapitation tactics used by the US security strategists. AQIS has also been facing similar issues. Hence, much is dependent on US policy decisions for the region in near future.