

## The Resurgent Jihadist Threat: A Thematic Analysis of Contemporary Al-Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) Propaganda

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### **Abstract:**

The study seeks to analyse and explain major themes present in contemporary Al-Qaeda propaganda focusing on Pakistan. Despite challenges by rival Jihadist outfits in the region, Al-Qaeda has been successful in maintaining a significant ground presence and has undergone a resurgence, primarily due to international counter terrorism efforts focused on its direct rival, ISIS. As part of this revival, Al-Qaeda announced the creation of its subcontinent affiliate, 'Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent' (AQIS), in 2014. Since then, AQIS has emerged as a major security threat in South Asia, with the scope of its ambitions outlined in its widely circulated online propaganda magazines. AQIS's most recent propaganda venture, titled '*Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind*', is an Urdu language publication aimed at fostering local support for Al-Qaeda's regional and global objectives. By examining how the Pakistani state is depicted in the *Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind* publication, the research argues that Al-Qaeda considers the present democratic Pakistani state to be an obstacle for its radical goals in the region. Lastly, the study outlines steps which can be taken by concerned security departments to counter the dissemination of online jihadist propaganda.

**Keywords:** Online Jihad, propaganda, Al-Qaeda, Media, Terrorism.

## Introduction:

The Al-Qaeda chief, Dr. Ayman al Zawahiri, announced the creation of a dedicated affiliate branch in September 2014 to fight governments in South Asia, including Pakistan<sup>1</sup>. The establishment of the new group, known as Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), was made in a video message posted online and circulated via Jihadist handles on social media<sup>2</sup>. For Al-Qaeda, South Asia holds important significance, as the region is home to the world's largest Muslim population, with as much as one-third of all Muslims belonging to South Asia. There have also been historical linkages between Al-Qaeda and domestic terror organizations operating in the area (such as *Harkat-ul Jihad al-Islami* operate as AQIS allies). For example, the leader of Bangladesh's Jihad Movement, Fazlur Rehman, was one of the signatories of Sheikh Osama Bin Laden's 1998 *fatwa* calling for *jihad* against the United States and Israel<sup>3</sup>. According to Bruce Hoffman, the creation of AQIS demonstrates an intent on part of Al-Qaeda to shift from an Arab to South Asian demographic base<sup>4</sup>. A particular matter of concern for Islamabad is that the establishment of AQIS also signalled the beginning of a formal institutional relationship

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1 Staff, "Al-Qaeda Chief Zawahiri Launches Al-Qaeda in South Asia," BBC News (BBC, September 4, 2014), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-29056668>.

2 The announcement was made public originally on the anonymous video sharing platform 'liveleak' ([https://www.liveleak.com/view?i=888\\_1409777288](https://www.liveleak.com/view?i=888_1409777288)). It has since been removed because of incitement to violence.

3 Report, "Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS): The Nucleus of Jihad in South Asia," The Soufan Center, accessed July 29, 2020, <https://thesoufancenter.org/research/al-qaeda-in-the-indian-subcontinent-aqis-the-nucleus-of-jihad-in-south-asia/>, 11.

4 Report, "Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS): The Nucleus of Jihad in South Asia," 13.

between numerous terrorist factions operating inside Pakistan (detailed list given below)<sup>5</sup>. Even though linkages between different terrorist organizations inside Pakistan is not an entirely new phenomena; AQIS represents an unprecedented threat due to the cementing of alliances between local terrorist groups on one hand, and increased coordination with terrorist organizations operating all over South Asia on the other. According to Dr. Alistair Reed's study<sup>6</sup>, AQIS has successfully established linkages and brought elements of the following organizations under the Al-Qaeda banner:

- Afghan Taliban (Afghanistan)
- Tehreek-e-Taliban / TTP (Pakistan)
- *Harkat-ul-Jihad al Islami* / HuJI (Pakistan and Bangladesh)
- *Harkat-ul-Mujahideen* / HuM (Kashmir)
- *Harkat-ul-Mujahideen al Almi* / HuMA (Pakistan)
- Brigade 313 (Pakistan)
- *Jaish-e-Mohammad* / JeM (Pakistan)
- *Lashkar-e-Jhangvi* / LeJ (Pakistan)
- *Jundullah* (Pakistan)
- *Ansar ut-Tawhid wa al Jihad* (Kashmir)
- *Ansar al Islam* (Bangladesh)
- *Indian Mujahideen* / IM (India)
- *Lashkar-e-Taiba* / LeT (Pakistan)
- Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (Pakistan)

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Alastair Reed, "Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent: A New Frontline in the Global Jihadist Movement?," *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism Studies*, 2016, pp. 1-25, <https://doi.org/10.19165/2016.2.02, 4>.

- Turkistan Islamic Party (Pakistan)

In addition to formal operational linkages between various terrorist organizations, AQIS has relied extensively on exploitation of tribal divisions in erstwhile FATA to carry out attacks against the Pakistani state<sup>7</sup>. Because of Al-Qaeda's historical presence in the area, the jihadists have fostered deep ties with tribes in the Waziristan region, according to the interrogation of high-profile Al-Qaeda operative Mohammad Asif, the now late chief of AQIS, Asim Umar, who spent most of his time under the protection of TTP in their stronghold of South Waziristan. In turn, AQIS provided logistical and operational support to TTP for its numerous attacks against the state of Pakistan. The University of Maryland's Global Terrorism Database confirms this collaboration, as it estimates that TTP and AQIS have launched joint attacks against Pakistan on numerous occasions<sup>8</sup>. Another major reason why AQIS has been successful in its collaboration between various terrorist organizations is because Al-Qaeda appointed a local jihadist to lead the organization. Maulana Asim Umar, who led AQIS before his assassination in a drone strike on 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2019<sup>9</sup>, was an Indian citizen and trained theologian with extensive contacts throughout South Asia. Maulana Umar also served as a commander in the TTP and later joined Al-Qaeda to lead its online propaganda efforts. After his assassination, it is thus far unclear as to who has

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7 Report, "Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS): The Nucleus of Jihad in South Asia," 16.

8 Ibid.

9 Staff, "Asim Umar: Al-Qaeda's South Asia Chief 'Killed in Afghanistan'," BBC News (BBC, October 8, 2019), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-49970353>.

succeeded him. However, given that Al-Qaeda has come to rely increasingly on local leadership in South Asia, it is unlikely that a foreign jihadist would be chosen to lead AQIS.

### **Limitations of Research:**

This study, despite aiming to tackle important security issues, presents certain challenges and difficulties. The primary issue is that the research relies on a fairly limited sample size of four issues of the *Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind* propaganda magazine. A possibility thus exists that the themes highlighted in these editions would later on change. On the other hand, analyzing limited issues has its own merits. The primary advantage is that it makes the research more manageable and coherent, in addition to allowing for a more thorough reading. Also, since *Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind* is Al-Qaeda's most nascent propaganda venture, a study of its editions allows us to gauge the direction which the terrorist organization might take in the near future. Another possible concern with the study is that it seeks to interpret the *Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind* magazine in isolation, while ignoring vast amounts of propaganda produced by Al-Qaeda in other languages, most notably English<sup>10</sup>. Al-Qaeda's media cell has a reputation of being a pioneer in publishing Jihadist propaganda in the English language and an ideal study would have been a comparison of themes present in its vast propaganda publication in English with those pointed out in the *Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind* magazine. However, as explained later in the study, Al-Qaeda has undergone a strategic shift of late and now

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10 For reference, see *Inspire* and *Resurgence* magazines.

places more emphasis on fostering on-ground support through the propagation of localized popular objectives. In such a changing scenario, analyzing *Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind* in isolation makes more sense, since it is an Urdu language publication with a more specific subcontinental Muslim target audience as opposed to the more global narrative of Al-Qaeda's English propaganda. A similar problem is that the research does not address prior Al-Qaeda narratives on South Asia, which were reflected in the now defunct English language *Resurgence* magazine. The research is thus based on the assumption that the *Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind* magazine presents a shift from previous Al-Qaeda propaganda focusing on the subcontinent region. Lastly, the study does not quantify details of dissemination nor does it provide an estimate of the *Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind* magazine's readership figures. One way to tackle this problem is tallying the magazine's download frequencies but such a venture has its own limitations. Firstly, software availability for such a process is an issue and secondly; the magazines are hosted online on several changing websites and blogs, which make an authentic tally or estimate of readership almost impossible.

#### **Al-Qaeda's 'Strategic Logic' behind AQIS:**

Varying explanations exist as to why Al-Qaeda chose to establish AQIS in September 2014. As per Dr. Alistair Reed's study<sup>11</sup>, Al-Qaeda's intent to diversify its branches and ensure regional autonomy for its affiliate groups is the primary reason behind the

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11 Reed, "Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent," 5-10

formation of AQIS. Other scholars, such as Jordan Olmstead<sup>12</sup>, have argued that AQIS was created to counter the ISIS ‘caliphate’ and is the outcome of an intra Jihadi conflict. In one of its prominent propaganda publications, Al-Qaeda claimed that the roots of the AQIS project go back to mid-2013 and has got nothing to do with the rise of ISIS<sup>13</sup>. In a similar argument, security expert Shreya Das<sup>14</sup> asserts that the groundwork behind AQIS was laid well before the emergence of ISIS and that Al-Qaeda had earlier made a failed attempt to establish a South Asian affiliate. Furthermore, Das also points out that the creation of AQIS is part of Al-Qaeda’s public relations strategy to bolster its image and maintain a distinct brand identity. There have also been indications on part of Al-Qaeda that there were geo-political factors at play behind the formation of AQIS.

In another propaganda publication (*Resurgence*), Al-Qaeda linked the establishment of AQIS to the American withdrawal from Afghanistan and the failure of Allied troops to subdue the Taliban insurgency<sup>15</sup>. This indicates that Al-Qaeda plans to re-deploy its battle-hardened fighters all over South Asia after the eventual American troop withdrawal from Afghanistan<sup>16</sup>. Likewise, such a scenario may also signal a shift from Al-Qaeda’s *grand strategy* of

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12 Jordan Olmstead, “The Real Reason Al-Qaeda Is Establishing an India Branch,” *The Diplomat* (The Diplomat, September 23, 2014), <https://thediplomat.com/2014/09/the-real-reason-al-qaeda-is-establishing-an-india-branch/>.

13 AQIS, *Resurgence Issue 2*, p.67.

14 Reed, “Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent,” 6.

15 AQIS, *Resurgence Issue 1*, p.20.

16 Staff, “Afghan Conflict: US and Taliban Sign Deal to End 18-Year War,” *BBC News* (BBC, February 29, 2020), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-51689443>.

targeting the ‘far’ enemy towards focusing on fighting domestic governments in South Asia, including that of Pakistan. Historically, Al-Qaeda established itself as the world’s most feared terror organization by staging a series of high-profile terrorist attacks against the ‘far’ enemy, namely the United States and NATO. The attacks included the 1998 bombings of US embassies in Tanzania and Nairobi; as well as a series of simultaneous explosions in Madrid’s train system during the lead up to the 2004 general elections. The most publicized Al-Qaeda attacks were of course the 9/11 hijackings and the July 2005 bombings in London. If Al-Qaeda indeed plans to shift its focus away from western powers and towards targeting regional governments in South Asia, this would mark a colossal break from its established operational blueprint and present a challenging threat to the South Asian region. The rise of AQIS also raises the possibility that the future leadership of Al-Qaeda would be drawn from its ranks<sup>17</sup>. As the Afghan *jihad* draws to a close, the South Asian region would become more susceptible to terrorist violence, since AQIS would be competing with other Al-Qaeda affiliates for overall command of the jihadist movement.

### **Evolution of Al-Qaeda’s Online Propaganda:**

The internet is an ideal medium for dissemination of Jihadist propaganda as it is easy to use, offers terrorist organizations multimedia features and maintains anonymity. The emergence and growth of freeware platforms such as *WordPress*<sup>18</sup> means that a

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17 Reed, “Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent,” 6.

18 Staff, "About," WordPress, accessed July 31, 2020, <https://wordpress.org/about/>.

significant online presence can be ensured at almost zero financial cost and bare minimum technical expertise. Likewise, the proliferation of secure internet messaging apps such as *Signal*<sup>19</sup> and *Telegram*<sup>20</sup> allow terrorists' to securely communicate and plan operations. With more than 3.2 billion internet users, comprising over half of the world's population, terrorist organizations have come to rely increasingly on the internet for their operations<sup>21</sup>. According to a study by the European Union Institute for Security Studies, 90% of people in their early teens to late twenties are active on the internet and spend a staggering 19.2 hours per week online<sup>22</sup>. It is therefore not surprising that the concerned age group is the primary target audience of radical Jihadist propaganda.

Although the online propaganda efforts of ISIS have gained most attention and notoriety, it is important to note that it was Al-Qaeda which established itself as a pioneer in the use of modern technology for terrorist activities. In the decade of the 90's, Al-Qaeda employed *mail lists* to share information on a mass scale and used *encrypted communication* to mount infamous attacks such as the embassy bombings in Tanzania and Nairobi, as well as

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19 Brian X. Chen, "Worried About the Privacy of Your Messages? Download Signal," The New York Times (The New York Times, December 7, 2016), <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/07/technology/personaltech/worried-about-the-privacy-of-your-messages-download-signal.html>.

20 Stuart Dredge, "Messaging App Telegram Added 5m New Users the Day after WhatsApp Outage," The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, February 24, 2014), <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/feb/24/telegram-messaging-app-whatsapp-down-facebook>.

21 Gabriel Weimann, "How Modern Terrorism Uses the Internet," 3.

22 Patryk Pawlak and Beatrice Berton, "Cyber Jihadists and Their Web," European Union Institute for Security Studies, January 30, 2015, , accessed July 31, 2020, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/cyber-jihadists-and-their-web>.

9/11<sup>23</sup>. In 2001, Al-Qaeda launched its own website on the *world wide web* and by 2003, Al-Qaeda's mass circulated manifesto called *39 Principles of Jihad* began citing 'Cyber Jihad' as one of its key principles<sup>24</sup>. Concerned that their statements were being filtered or manipulated by mainstream media outlets, Al-Qaeda next attempted to launch its dedicated online news service called *Voice of the Caliphate* in 2005<sup>25</sup>. The Al-Qaeda leadership clearly understood the power of public opinion and the benefits which a PR centric approach could reap. In a letter to one of his commanders, Dr Ayman al Zawahiri wrote, '*We are in a battle, and more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. We are in a media battle for the hearts and minds of our Ummah*'<sup>26</sup>

Like Dr. Zawahiri, former Al-Qaeda chief Sheikh Osama bin Laden also understood the importance of public opinion and his statements indicate that Bin Laden had a thorough understanding of the media's potential in aiding the Jihadist cause. In his most well publicized interview with CNN journalist Peter Arnett in March 1997, when Bin Laden was asked about his future plans, the Al-Qaeda chief replied; '*You'll see them and hear about them in the*

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23 Robert Graham, "How Terrorists Use Encryption," Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point, November 15, 2017, accessed July 31, 2020, <https://ctc.usma.edu/how-terrorists-use-encryption/>.

24 Laden, Joel. "Al-Qaeda's 39 Principles of Jihad." Israel News Agency. Accessed June 09, 2018. <http://www.israelnewsagency.com/Al-Qaeda.html>.

25 Anton La Guardia Diplomatic Editor, "Al-Qaeda Launches Voice of the Caliphate Internet News Bulletins," The Telegraph, September 28, 2005, accessed July 31, 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/1499428/Al-Qaeda-launches-Voice-of-the-Caliphate-internet-news-bulletins.html>.

26 Final Report of the 9-11 Commission," F.A.S., accessed July 31, 2020, [http://www.fas.org/irp/news/2005/10/letter\\_in\\_arabic](http://www.fas.org/irp/news/2005/10/letter_in_arabic).

*media, God willing*<sup>27</sup>.' In another interview, Bin Laden spoke at length regarding the Western media's role in spreading fear amongst masses by engaging in a propaganda campaign against Al-Qaeda. According to Bin Laden; Western media is more harmful to the West than it is to the Jihadists, and that, '*What the enemies of the America cannot do, its media is doing*<sup>28</sup>.' Another prominent example of Bin Laden's attempt to shape public opinion was an Al-Qaeda document titled *Offer of Armistice with Europe* circulated online in April 2004. In the concerned document, Bin Laden directed his followers '*to form a permanent committee to enlighten the European people of the justice of our cause...they can make use of the huge potential of the media*<sup>29</sup>.' In addition to their media statements and interviews, the Al-Qaeda leadership also employed the policy of strategic media blackout to spread confusion. When Bin Laden was inquired as to which target would Al-Qaeda hit next, the Al-Qaeda chief replied; '*Our silence is our real propaganda*<sup>30</sup>.'

The next stage in Al-Qaeda's online media strategy arrived after the launch of popular video sharing website *YouTube* in 2005. Around the same time, an American born cleric, Anwar al Awlaki

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27 CNN, "Exclusive Osama Bin Laden- First Ever TV Interview," YouTube, January 10, 2012, accessed July 31, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dqQwnqJA-6w>.

28 Staff, "Sheikh Osama Bin Laden's Interview to Daily Ummat," Khilafah.com, September 28, 2001, accessed June 11, 2018,

[www.khilafah.com/1421/category.php?DocumentID=2392&TagID=2v](http://www.khilafah.com/1421/category.php?DocumentID=2392&TagID=2v).

29 Al-Qaeda, "Offer of Armistice With Europe," Archive.org, April 14, 2004, , accessed June 31, 2020, [www.archive.org/download/hygNGF/454.mp3](http://www.archive.org/download/hygNGF/454.mp3).

30Staff, "Sheikh Osama Bin Laden's Interview to Daily Ummat," 2001.

emerged as Al-Qaeda's leading online propagandist<sup>31</sup>. Awlaki considerably improved Al-Qaeda's ability to recruit via online platforms and was highly influential in the launch of Al-Qaeda's first mass circulated English propaganda magazine called *Inspire*. Awlaki was killed in an American drone strike in 2011, terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda have followed and added innovations to Awlaki's propaganda strategy, leading to an unprecedented expansion in online presence.<sup>32</sup> Regional associates of Al-Qaeda, such as AQIS, have also followed the Awlaki blueprint. This has led to a proliferation of online jihadist propaganda in multiple languages.

#### **Thematic Analysis of AQIS Propaganda:**

In response to the Afghan peace deal of February 2020, AQIS announced the rebranding of its online Urdu language propaganda magazine as *Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind*. The rebranding is a clear indication that AQIS plans to shift its attention away from the Afghan theatre and instead focus on targeting countries in the Indian subcontinent, including Pakistan. For the purposes of this study, four issues<sup>33</sup> of the *Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind* propaganda magazine are analysed to explain recurring themes. The study aims

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31 Staff, "Online Preachers of Hate: Anwar Al-Awlaki, 'bin Laden of the Internet'," The Telegraph, June 07, 2011, accessed July 31 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/terrorism-in-the-uk/8560438/Online-preachers-of-hate-Anwar-al-Awlaki-bin-Laden-of-the-internet.html>.

32 Scott Shane, "The Enduring Influence of Anwar Al-Awlaki in the Age of the Islamic State," Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point, November 16, 2017, <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-enduring-influence-of-anwar-al-awlaki-in-the-age-of-the-islamic-state/>.

33AQIS, *Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind Issue 1-4*.

to provide a clear picture of AQIS propaganda against the state of Pakistan, so that an effective counter strategy can be developed.

**1) Provoking a Pakistan-India war and attempts to discredit Kashmir's democratic resistance:**

The possible scenario of a full-scale Pakistan-India war features heavily in AQIS propaganda. Al-Qaeda believes that such a conflict would create conditions which enable the realization of its goal to establish a 'caliphate' in the region. AQIS has previously attempted to stage terrorist attacks which would lead to a catastrophic war in South Asia. The most infamous of such incidents was the failed attempt to hijack a Pakistan Navy vessel in September 2014<sup>34</sup>. AQIS has consistently featured war mongering rhetoric in its propaganda. In the first issue of *Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind* published in April 2020, AQIS calls for a *jihād* throughout South Asia to establish a Shariah state which encompasses the territories of Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Myanmar<sup>35</sup>. Similarly, AQIS has attempted to hijack Kashmir's democratic mass movement against the Indian government by depicting it in terms of a religious struggle and appealing to jihadists to stage violent attacks against the Indian government. Such a scenario would both discredit the peaceful Kashmiri resistance and increase the likelihood of war between Islamabad and New Delhi. Similarly, in the May 2020 issue of the *Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind* magazine, AQIS published an article paying

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<sup>34</sup>Fahim Zaman, "Dockyard Attackers Planned to Hijack Navy Frigate," DAWN.COM, September 13, 2014, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1131654>.

<sup>35</sup>AQIS, *Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind Issue 1*, p.1.

tribute to former militant commander Zakir Musa<sup>36</sup>. It is known that Musa was actively working against Pakistani interests in Kashmir and had pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda chief Ayman al Zawahiri<sup>37</sup>. As opposed to Islamabad's declared policy of claiming Indian occupied Kashmir as its sovereign territory, Zakir Musa instead joined ranks with global Jihadism<sup>38</sup>. This had the effect of undermining Indian occupied Kashmir's political struggle for independence, as New Delhi began to associate protests with radical Jihadism to gain international support for their violent crackdown. Al-Qaeda's patronage and continued eulogizing of Zakir Musa in propaganda is therefore another indicator of threats posed by the terror group to Islamabad's national interests. Likewise, in the June 2020 issue of *Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind*, AQIS featured an article calling for women to aid their cause by staging suicide bombings in the Kashmir region<sup>39</sup>. As noted, before, high casualty attacks such as suicide bombings caused by Al-Qaeda would spike tensions in the subcontinent and likely result in a Pakistan-India military conflict. Lastly, apart from encouraging Jihadists to conduct attacks, AQIS has called on the Pakistani state to ignite a military conflict with New Delhi. In an article published for the July 2020 issue of *Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind*, AQIS questioned Islamabad's existing policy of restraint and diplomacy to solve the

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36 AQIS, *Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind Issue 2*, p.79.

37 Farhan Zahid, "Zakir Musa's Death and Its Impact on Al-Qaeda's Ambitions in Indian Kashmir," Jamestown, July 31, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/brief/zakir-musas-death-and-its-impact-on-al-qaedas-ambitions-in-indian-kashmir/>.

38 Saad Hasan, "Zakir Musa: Kashmir's 'Loneliest Militant'," TRT World, May 25, 2019, <https://www.trtworld.com/asia/zakir-musa-kashmir-s-loneliest-militant-26955>.

39 AQIS, *Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind Issue 3*, p.110.

Kashmir dispute. Instead, AQIS urges for a military solution to the matter<sup>40</sup> and downplays repercussions of such a move.

## 2) Arguments against Pakistan's democratic structure:

AQIS considers Pakistan's Westminster style parliamentary system to be an obstacle in the establishment of *khilafah* in the region. Critiques on Pakistan's governance system are hence a recurrent feature in the *Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind* magazine. The April 2020 issue of the propaganda document contains a lengthy critique of the emergence of *nation-states* post Westphalia<sup>41</sup>. AQIS argues that nation states, such as Pakistan, take decisions based on *national interest* and avoid policies which are in the greater good of the Islamic Ummah. The solution, according to AQIS, lies in the upheaval of the democratic state structure of Pakistan and its replacement with a Sharia enforced *khilafah* encompassing all of South Asia. In addition to criticism on the nation state system and calling for a return of the caliphate, AQIS has also published *fatwas* of likeminded religious scholars and excerpts from their published work. This is done to create a sense of legitimacy for their claims. One such article was published in the May 2020 issue of *Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind*, which criticised democracy by referencing the works of *ulema* such as Shah Wali Ullah, Maulana Ashraf Ali, Maulana Yusuf Ludhianvi etc<sup>42</sup>. Quotes were cited from the work of such scholars to build a narrative amongst readers that democracy is incompatible with Islam. Likewise, the June

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40 AQIS, *Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind Issue 4*, p.81.

41 AQIS, *Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind Issue 1*, p.67.

42 AQIS, *Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind Issue 2*, p.35.

2020 issue of *Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind* features another article criticizing democracy and the capitalist system<sup>43</sup>. The free market economic system has emerged as a foundational cornerstone of democracy since the Industrial Revolution and AQIS highlights the social inequalities resultant from government's non-interference in the economy. The concerned article is a complicated take on issues which come about because of a few Western powers exerting disproportionate influence in the world's interlinked economy. According to AQIS, its *khilafah* would rid the Muslim world of the supposed hardships and tribulations associated with both democracy and the capitalist economy. These problems include political instability, widespread poverty and western hegemony in the international system. Finally, in the July 2020 issue of the magazine, AQIS provides a brief sketch of Pakistan's political history since independence and a narrative is built linking democracy to the constant recycling of a few prominent families in power<sup>44</sup>. Such propaganda seeks to create mistrust amongst readers regarding the viability of Pakistan's democratic process. AQIS seeks to capitalize on this mistrust and then eventually build up more on-ground support for its terrorist activities.

### **3) Indications of greater geo-political ambitions:**

Amongst the four issues of *Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind* analysed, there were repeated references which indicated that AQIS holds geo-political ambitions problematic to the Pakistani state. In the April

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43 AQIS, *Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind Issue 3*, p.84.

44 AQIS, *Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind Issue 4*, p.79.

2020 issue of the magazine, AQIS discusses the ongoing corona virus pandemic and portrays it as divine punishment for China's persecution of Muslims in Xinjiang province<sup>45</sup>. The Chinese government's treatment of its Muslim minority is a source of intense debate and there are political factors at play, as Beijing's state rivals such as the United States are accused of spreading misinformation regarding the issue. AQIS declared the Xinjiang province as *East Turkestan* and declares it to be part of its envisioned *khilafah*. China and Pakistan are close allies with deep rooted mutual interests in the region. By shifting focus to Beijing and threatening violent action there, AQIS poses additional challenges to the Pakistani state as Islamabad's economy is in the process of receiving a major boost through Chinese investment and infrastructure development. Another threat to Islamabad posed by AQIS are its plans for Afghanistan post American withdrawal. In one of its propaganda pieces, AQIS states that the exit of foreign troops from Kabul would usher a *khilafah* and Afghanistan would in future become a base of jihadist operations in the region<sup>46</sup>. This is in stark contrast to Pakistan's Afghan policy. Islamabad seeks to support the Afghan peace process and bring about an end to the ongoing conflict. To achieve the objective of a compromise in Afghanistan, Islamabad has played a pivotal role in bringing about all warring factions to the negotiating table. AQIS propaganda concerning Afghanistan therefore indicates that in future Pakistan would have to be wary of a Jihadist attempt to regain a foothold on

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45 AQIS, *Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind Issue 1*, p.34.

46 AQIS, *Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind Issue 2*, p.74.

its western front. The prospective threat of AQIS in Afghanistan is further demonstrated in a regular series of articles featuring in *Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind* which detail AQIS fighting against rival groups in Afghanistan<sup>47</sup>. The articles describe capture of sophisticated weapons and paint a picture of an impending victory for jihadist factions. In the years following the rise of ISIS, Jihadist groups have proliferated and there have been several instances of in-fighting. Military operations conducted by AQIS in Afghanistan along with allied Jihadist factions provide them valuable battlefield experience, which in turn poses a security threat to Islamabad because of its vast porous Western border.

#### **4) Appeals to a more educated demographic:**

One of the most prominent features of *Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind* magazine was that its content was clearly directed at an educated audience familiar with western literature and socio-political thought. One of the most prominent examples of this approach was an article titled *1984* published in the June 2020 issue of *Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind*<sup>48</sup>. The article featured a commentary on George Orwell's classic 20<sup>th</sup> century novel *1984*, which discussed themes of mass surveillance, excessive state control and a world plagued by perpetual conflict. The novel is considered compulsory reading material for university students studying the humanities and social sciences, as it details the dangers of paranoid governments amassing too much power over citizens. The article argues that the world we live in today is strikingly similar to the one described by

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47 AQIS, *Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind Issue 4*, p.88

48 AQIS, *Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind Issue 3*, p.75.

Orwell and that media organizations toe the government's line. AQIS then calls for its readers to disregard misinformation spread about them through mainstream media and decide for themselves what the actual reality might be. Likewise, the April 2020 edition of the propaganda magazine contains an analysis of the *market economy*<sup>49</sup>. The article employs the use of academic terminology and is a surprisingly well researched introduction to the history of the world's economic system post World War Two. There are references to the famed Bretton Woods Conference which kick-started the world economic model as we see today, as well as the de-merits of paper currency and the inherent advantages of using alternatives such as gold for trading purposes. The overarching argument is that such an economic system is inherently rigged in the favour of a few select countries and that Western hegemony over the Muslim world is made possible by their grip on the world's cash flow.

AQIS has also published material on the independence movement against the British Raj. One such article was featured in the May 2020 issue of *Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind*, which described the anti-imperialist struggle of Sayyed Ahmed Shaheed<sup>50</sup>. The concerned article was loaded with historical references and AQIS published this piece with an educated reader as their intended audience. Finally, in the July 2020 issue of *Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind*, AQIS featured a commentary on contemporary developments in the

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49 AQIS, *Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind Issue 1*, p.60.

50 AQIS, *Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind Issue 2*, p.35-39.

world<sup>51</sup>. The article discussed diverse issues including politics and the corona virus pandemic, as well as the latest developments in the scientific world. The focus of AQIS on educated youth presents an alarming development. As inflation and unemployment increases in Pakistan, disenfranchised youth are at risk of becoming vulnerable to extremist propaganda. The problem is compounded as the overwhelming majority of Pakistan's population is under the age of 30. Terrorist organizations such as AQIS hence sense an opportunity to capitalize on socio-economic grievances to recruit the young educated demographic for terrorist activities.

#### **Countering Online Terrorist Propaganda:**

Despite attempts made by terrorist organizations such as AQIS to sustain their propaganda operations, there exist several steps which can be taken by Islamabad to counter the dissemination of online terrorist propaganda. These include:

- 1) Establishment of a dedicated authority to monitor terrorist propaganda posted on social media handles operating from Pakistan. As of now, existing institutions such as the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) and Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) perform a variety of different tasks. With increasing social media usage in the country, a separate authority to monitor extremist content is recommended.

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51 AQIS, *Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind Issue 4*, p.67.

- 2) Greater state level collaboration with ‘big tech’ companies such as Facebook and Twitter to take down problematic content before it is shared.
- 3) Creating ‘counter-narratives’ by discrediting claims made by terrorist organizations<sup>52</sup>.
- 4) Extensive intelligence-based efforts to trace out sources of terrorist propaganda.
- 5) Timely registration of Virtual Private Network (VPN) users in Pakistan.
- 6) Limiting access to secure messaging apps such as Telegram and Signal to verified users only.
- 7) Greater collaboration with friendly countries such as China which possess technological expertise in countering online terrorist propaganda.
- 8) Cooperation between public and private sector institutions to further enhance protocols to stem online extremist content
- 9) Use of Artificial Intelligence to identify and remove extremist propaganda. A.I. algorithms can be developed by a comprehensive study of terrorist propaganda to identify and block future instances of such content.
- 10) Developing reporting mechanisms for extremist content on lesser-known forums such as 8chan/4chan etc.

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<sup>52</sup> See next page for an example.???

Most of the recommended steps highlighted above constitute swift reactionary measures. However, by far the most important long-term policy decision in this regard is the creation of ‘counter narratives’ to discredit the claims of terrorist organizations such as AQIS. Terrorist organizations, similar to other groups vying for power, thrive by creating a narrative which resonates amongst a certain group of people. For a long term and permanent solution to the matter, it is the narrative which must be discredited by creating an alternative retelling of events which provides an alternative world view to the one espoused by terrorist organizations. Former de-radicalized jihadists and *ulema* which support a peaceful interpretation of religion can be utilized for such narrative building.

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