



Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)

Forum for National Security Studies (FNSS)

13/20

Understanding the interests of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in India

Saurav Sarkar
Research Associate, CAPS

Keywords: Al-Qaeda, Islamic State, India, ISI, LeT, Terrorism

Recently, Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) have increased their focus on India and the wider Indian Subcontinent as a whole, on account of different underlying factors. While they remain similar in most aspects they have certain differences in ideology and operational methods which make them distinct. Al-Qaeda remains focused on its global message while encouraging local activities in India that are in line with its larger ambitions. IS, however, remains focused more on instigating attacks in India by exploiting communal tensions and its presence mostly relies on its “brand-value” and propaganda dissemination. Al-Qaeda has a stronger base in the Indian Subcontinent due to historical and personnel linkages as well as ties to regional groups such as the Taliban while IS is a largely alien concept to the region and has struggled to find a proper operational foundation and alliances.

Establishment of local branches of Al-Qaeda and IS in India

Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) was formed in September 2014 as a natural expansion of Al-Qaeda as from the earliest days of the global jihad movement South Asia has been a nucleus of support, personnel and sanctuary for the group. AQIS was an attempt at uniting pre-existing jihadist groups (many of which are anti-India and based in Pakistan) in the Indian Subcontinent with whom Al-Qaeda already had a clandestine working relationship. In 2017, AQIS had formed an affiliate in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) known as Ansar Ghazwat ul Hind (AGH) led by Kashmiri militants formerly affiliated to the Pakistan-based militant group Hizbul Mujahedeen (HM).¹ In comparison, IS first had a presence in India in 2016 when it announced its intention to extend into J&K as a part of its Khorasan Province (ISKP).² Then in May 2019 IS Hind Province (ISHP), or India province, was formed.

It can be surmised that AQIS was formed relatively late as Al-Qaeda had been in existence since 1988. South Asia despite being an important region for Al-Qaeda had not been a priority theater of action for the group, especially India, which had faced relatively lesser threats from Al-Qaeda. AQIS may have been formed to attempt to expand its area of influence after the rise of IS in June 2014 and as many of its senior members were being killed in Afghanistan and Pakistan. AGH had till date not carried out attacks in India apart from some encounters with Indian security forces. IS, however, was quick to claim stray attacks as early as 2017 when a Kashmiri militant killed a policeman in J&K despite the attacker having no previous links to IS.³ ISHP was formed after IS lost its territory in the Middle East and as ISKP was rapidly losing ground in Afghanistan. It was formed to give IS a local template to apply to better temper its strategy, tactics, and recruitment tailored to India.

AQIS and ISHP activities in recent times

Recently, ISHP and AQIS have refocused their propaganda efforts in India at attempting to rally Indian Muslims citing alleged incidents of communal violence and alleged anti-Muslim policies of the present national government. IS released its India-centric monthly magazine *Sawt al-Hind (SaH)* (Voice of Hind) in February in the aftermath of the Citizen Amendment Act (CAA) and criticized Indian leadership and called on Indian Muslims.⁴ This was preceded by its

weekly newsletter *Al Naba* mentioning the CAA and another online propaganda via its J&K media *Al-Burhan* addressing Indian Muslims as “soldiers of the Caliphate” and urged them to target Indian intelligence agencies and Hindu nationalist groups.⁵ AQIS spoke against the CAA even earlier, in January, and urged Indian Muslims to revolt and declare jihad against the Indian government and in March called for lone wolf attacks.⁶

Another common thread that is seen in AQIS and ISHP is that both denounce the Pakistani state and Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI)-linked terror groups such as Lashka-e-Taiba (LeT). And on the issue of Kashmir both groups talk of pan-Islamism and denounce any nationalist or separatist movements going so far as to threaten both mainstream Kashmiri politicians along with declaring violent intents against militants affiliated with other groups unless they join them.⁷ IS takes it a step further by calling on AGH militants to join ISHP and fight for its caliphate. AGH has, however, at least in one instance called for reconciliation among LeT, HM, and ISHP after they had a tussle back in June 2019. AGH seems to have some ground support in J&K as during an encounter in south Kashmir involving its deputy emir on April 28 its media channels were able to mobilize locals to harass Indian security forces carrying out the operation. Going one step further, a newly formed Kashmiri militant group, The Resistance Front, paid tributes to the three AGH terrorists killed in the

encounter. IS did not have a smooth start in J&K and still struggles as the established terror groups have opposed it vehemently, even going as far as head-hunting IS members.⁸ AGH also during its early days clashed with the existing ISI-backed groups.

Divergences between AQIS and ISHP

The dissimilarity in recent times in the approach of IS and Al-Qaeda in India stems mainly from regional factors. AQIS had changed the name of its Urdu language magazine Nawa-e-Afghan Jihad to Nawa-e-Ghazwa-e-Hind (NGH) in March⁹, a few weeks after IS released the first edition of SaH. AQIS' magazine name change might have been brought by the need to put forward the impression of some distance between Al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban after the U.S.-Taliban peace agreement for appearance's sake by showcasing that the main priority theater would instead be the Indian Subcontinent and not Afghanistan for AQIS. However, the magazine's contents suggest nothing of the sort that Al-Qaeda and the Taliban are separating but instead AQIS praises the Taliban for prevailing over the United States in Afghanistan. Another explanation for the name change could be that Al-Qaeda in its own way wants to promote that its jihad alongside the Taliban against U.S. forces had been successful in Afghanistan and now the time has come to take the jihad forward to the Indian Subcontinent.

IS in its third edition of SaH released in April 2020 also mentioned the concept of Ghazwa-e-Hind and for the first time mentions attacks, long past and recent, in Khorasan (Afghanistan), Pakistan, Kashmir (India), Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Maldives. It also paid tribute to "migrants from India" who joined IS in Iraq and Syria and mentions the first Indian who carried out a suicide attack for IS in Iraq.¹⁰ In the first edition of SaH IS eulogized a former LeT terrorist who joined IS and was instrumental in forming ISHP and in radicalization and recruitment of Kashmiri youth, killed in Afghanistan last year. It seems common practice for IS to mention members with an Indian connection in SaH. In the second edition of the magazine IS mentions a Kashmiri terrorist killed in J&K in an encounter in 2018.¹¹ In almost all editions the Taliban is thoroughly mocked and denounced by ISHP for its dealings with the US and other countries unlike AQIS which praises the Taliban every time it mentions them.

Three days after the third edition of Sawt al-Hind was released AQIS released a 110 pages long second edition of NGH. Taking cues from ISHP, AQIS mentions a Kashmiri terrorist from AGH who gives details about his recruitment and rather openly acknowledges AGH's weapons shortages that initially denied him membership. The magazine also mentioned the importance of Kashmir and it the "gateway to Hind."¹²

Conclusion

In recent times, the jihadi race to the Indian subcontinent seems to be heating up between AQIS and ISHP as both have devoted significant attention and propaganda to the socio-political situation in India. A major push behind this has been the U.S.-Taliban agreement. Further while both Al-Qaeda and IS desire the triumph of their respective version of Islam both have found difficulty in operating in India as well as attracting followers due to the dominance of Pakistan-backed groups and as terrorists in places like J&K and Afghanistan rely on states particularly, Pakistan for their weapons and logistics. Even though Al-Qaeda is an old player in the South Asian region, IS has caught up well in South Asia terms of popularity due to its “brand value” and propaganda. Multiple IS-related plots were busted across India by authorities in recent years and the ability of IS to instigate attacks remains substantial even though it has waned with the fall of the caliphate, however, Al-Qaeda remains a long term threat because of its ability to work with other terror groups and its decades old presence in the region. These developments are important to note to be able to tighten the counter-terrorism efforts in India.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ The Soufan Center, “Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent: The Nucleus of Jihad in South Asia”, January 2019, <https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Al-Qaeda-in-the-Indian-Subcontinent-AQIS.pdf>, accessed on April 27, 2020.

² Amira Jadoon, “An India or a Threat? Islamic State Jammu and Kashmir”, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, February 9, 2020, <https://ctc.usma.edu/idea-threat-islamic-state-jammu-kashmir/>, accessed on April 27, 2020.

³ *The Tribune*, “IS Claims Zakura Attack”, November 19, 2020, <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/archive/j-k/is-claims-zakura-attack-500289>, accessed on April 27, 2020.

⁴ “SITE Intelligence Group, “Indian Subcontinent-Focused Pro IS Media Unit Publishes Inaugural Issue of Magazine”, February 25, 2020, <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Chatter/indian-subcontinent-focused-pro-is-media-unit-publishes-inaugural-issue-of-magazine.html>, accessed on April 28, 2020.

⁵ SITE Intelligence Group, “Jundul Khilafah Hind Media Unit Calls for Attacks on Intelligence Agencies and Hindus in India”, February 11, 2020, <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Chatter/jundul-khilafah-hind-media-unit-calls-for-attacks-on-intelligence-agencies-and-hindus-in-india.html>, accessed April 26, 2020.

⁶ SITE Intelligence Group, “AQIS Spokesman Decries Indian Anti-Islam Citizenship Law, Urges Muslims Revolt and Embrace Jihad”, January 23, 2020, <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/aqis-spokesman-decries-indian-anti-islam-citizenship-law-urges-muslims-revolt-and-embrace-jihad.html>, accessed April 28, 2020.

⁷ Siddhartha Roy, “Islamic State is Alive and Well in South Asia”, *The Diplomat*, November 5, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/11/islamic-state-is-aliveand-well-in-south-asia/>, accessed on April 26, 2020.

⁸ Faran Jeffrey, “Exclusive: The Mysterious Death Of Islamic State Wilayah Hind's Militant In Kashmir”, Aurora Intel, June 27, 2019, <https://auroraintel.net/asia-australia/exclusive-the-mysterious-death-of-islamic-state-wiyalah-hinds-militant-in-kashmir>, accessed on April 25, 2020.

⁹ Available at: <https://threader.app/thread/1241339768031580162>, posted on March 21, 2020, accessed on April 25, 2020

¹⁰ Kashmir Intel, “Sawt al-Hind (3)”, April 26, 2020, <https://kashmirosint.wordpress.com/2020/04/26/sawt-al-hind-the-voice-of-hind-issue-3-brief-outline/>, accessed on April 27, 2020.

¹¹ Aaron Zelin, "New Issue of the Magazine: "Sawt al-Hind #2"", Jihadology, March 25, 2020, <https://jihadology.net/2020/03/25/new-issue-of-the-magazine-%e1%b9%a3awt-al-al-hind-2/>, accessed on April 25, 2020.

¹² AQIS propaganda channels on Telegram

