



GROWTH OF ISIS NETWORK IN PAKISTAN



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ISIS might be losing territory and ground in Iraq and Syria but its presence and influence is expanding within Pakistan. According to security experts, the number of ISIS operators in Pakistan is lower compared to the well-established Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and al-Qaeda. However, there has been a noticeable increase in the attacks on minorities launched by ISIS in Balochistan.

With ISIS faltering in Iraq and Syria the natural escape route for the group is South Asia and Central Asia. Pakistan, a country with nuclear assets, large youth population, rising extremism, struggling democracy and an active state policy to support terror is certainly attractive for ISIS. There have been reports suggesting that factions of TTP, al-Qaeda and LeT have pledged allegiance to ISIS Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi since 2014. There have been reports and videos that at least six senior members of the Pakistani Taliban pledged allegiance to ISIS in 2014 and Taliban spokesman Shahidullah Shahid made a statement:

“Oh our brothers, we are proud of you in your victories. We are with you in your happiness and your sorrow...” (Reuters)

The initial signs of ISIS in Pakistan were seen in late 2014 but the security authorities did not pay serious attention to the issue. In 2014 ‘wall chalking’ in support of the Islamic State was traced in some cities of Pakistan, including Karachi and Khanewal. In Taxila, law enforcement agencies confiscated ISIS flags, fixed to electricity poles near Pakistan Ordnance Factories (POF). The area being a part of Pakistan indigenous defence industry is heavily guarded with security cameras and police. It was surprising to see ISIS flags right at the entrance of the POF. Parts of north-west Pakistan also saw traces of ISIS slogans and messages.

ISIS terror operations are increasing in number and intensity, but what is alarming is ISIS’ ability to influence young educated minds. One such incident was the case of the 20-year-old medical student

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named Noreen Leghari, who disappeared from her hometown in Hyderabad. She then reached out to her parents on Facebook declaring her allegiance to ISIS. It was reported that she was in Lahore fully prepared to conduct a suicide bombing mission at an Easter Church Service (2017). Incidents of this nature indicate a serious upcoming trend in society which Pakistan will find impossible to counter militarily.

Pakistan security authorities have ignored ISIS presence till now, with focus of counter-terror operations being on TTP and al-Qaeda. Although ISIS concedes ground at home, it is expanding globally and its ideological appeal does not seem to be declining. The Islamic State might not function as an effective political entity but the organization continues to operate as a terrorist group in other parts of the world. Coalition strikes have significantly weakened the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, but if the sectarian tensions persist and Sunnis are alienated, resurgence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria is not unlikely. *Foreign Policy* reported that spokesman for U.S.-led military coalition in Baghdad, Col Ryan Dillon said, “even after the military defeat of ISIS there’s still going to be work to be done. ISIS will be defeated militarily, but we know that there still is going to be the ideology and the continued insurgent activity as they devolve into that.” Some observers fear that the world will see the resurrection of the *Islamic State: 2.0*

While a large number of security analysts believed that ISIS would not be able to survive in Afghanistan due to Taliban’s domineering presence there, the Islamic State has performed much better than expected. A serious development in recent times has been ISIS and Taliban collaborating to conduct terror attacks in Afghanistan. According to the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA): “Beginning in 2016, a pattern of attacks against Shi’a worshippers emerged, mainly claimed by Islamic State – Khorasan Province (ISKP).” Another Special report by UNAMA stated that the attack on Mirza Olang village in Sayyad district of Sari Pul province between 3-5th August 2017 was jointly conducted by Taliban and the self-proclaimed Islamic State. The ISIS group in Afghanistan, the Khorasan group, is an offshoot and has been recognized by ISIS in Iraq and Syria as an ally. What is interesting here is that the Khorasan group mainly comprises of the leaderless factions of the TTP.

ISIS and Taliban working together in Afghanistan is something Pakistani leadership cannot overlook and needs to watch carefully. ISIS’ motto being ‘remaining and expanding’ leads us to believe that there is a high probability of ISIS collaborating with the TTP and other splinter groups in Pakistan. TTP faction, Jamaat-ul-Arhar (JA), declared its allegiance to Islamic State in 2015 and the group has jointly claimed responsibility for some attacks signalling collaboration between ISIS and JA.

ISIS will certainly invest to expand its network in Pakistan and capitalize on the vulnerabilities of the state and substantial recruitment pool of existing jihadi organisations. In an interesting set of developments last year, Pakistan has seen emergence of the political wings of some extremist parties. With ISIS spreading its ideological and operational tentacles in Pakistan, not only the security landscape but the political landscape of Pakistan is also likely to get precariously affected. New Delhi needs to watch these developments in the neighbourhood rather carefully, to deter the spill-over effects of the ideological movement.

(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])

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