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Origin of ISIS; global impact and potential foothold in Pakistan

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ISIS Eyes Influence in Pakistan: Focus, Fears & Future Prospects

Introduction

The rapidly expanding militant force in Iraq and Syria known globally by its Arabic acronym *Daesh (al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham)[1]* or in English ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) is neither a myth nor does it appear to be a fleeting phenomenon.[2]Tragically, it is real and has historical roots. The militant group has succeeded in rapidly taking control of a large tract of territory in Iraq, as well as erasing parts of the border between Iraq and Syria, conceptually establishing its writ in a way that is more than a sanctuary but insufficient to place it in the category of a state. At best it is a fluid state at the moment – with its foundations soaking in blood and its architecture being constructed on the pillars of brutality, fear, oppression and distortion of Islamic principles. Its genesis in the contemporary context is not organic in nature but arguably a product of mistaken and misdirected global policies. History too has played its hand but the recent turmoil in Middle East, sectarian proxy wars, and confused handling of the Arab spring, have all influenced this state of affairs. The Al-Qaeda narrative has also contributed to this rise as an effort to establish an 'Islamic State' with military objectives and expansionist ideals. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self appointed 'caliph' of the ISIS lacks any religious credentials and doesn't even have support of major extremist Muslim groups around the world – but he has what none of them have – direct control of territory where around 8 million Muslims live. The five-year ISIS expansionist program is evident from the map that it purportedly released showing Pakistan as part of its 'Khurasan' province.[3]

In Al-Qaeda lingo, Khurasan (an area historically comprising parts of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan) will be the base camp of a new Islamic empire in the region. In Islamic narratives about 'end of times' and the emergence of Mahdi, there is some reference to the rise of 'black banners' from Khurasan, so the reference is powerful and hence many Muslim groups – both extremist and progressive - attempt to link themselves to it. So far extremists have an upper hand in owning this claim. For instance, Fazlullah– the terrorist in chief – of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) was not only motivated by this notion but he also considered himself the founder of the 'Khurasan movement.'[4]Insightfully, very recently he has started using a new surname 'Khurasani'.[5]Maybe he did it to compete with Omar Khalid Khurasani of Mohmand Agency (FATA) who now leads a rival group *Jamaat-ul-Ahrar*, a breakaway TTP faction.

This essay briefly explains the origins and genesis of ISIS and investigates its impact globally as well on South Asia. It then attempts to decipher the interests and influence of ISIS in Pakistan. It briefly analyzes why ISIS can or cannot develop a foothold in Pakistan. It probes local news items that project the presence of ISIS in Pakistan and discusses their authenticity and implications. Lastly, Pakistan's overall counterterrorism policy choices are analyzed keeping the ISIS threat in view. Some of the recommendations for Pakistan made towards the end of the paper are potentially relevant for states that appear to be on the periphery of ISIS operations at this time.

A Brief History of ISIS[6]

The group first emerged in Iraq 2003 as a loose organization built around the idea of resisting the foreign occupation of Iraq. It was initially operating under the title '*Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad'* (The Organization of Monotheism and Jihad) – founded originally in Jordan in 1999 - but was dubbed by many as 'Al-Qaeda in Iraq' due to its close connections to the terrorist group. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian-born militant who fought NATO forces in Afghanistan after 2001 was the lead. He had brought to Iraq with him only a handful of militants from the Afghanistan-Pakistan region but he maintained his connections there and even tried to send reinforcements to the Afghan theatre as well as to the militants in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Within Iraq, he had two prime targets – western forces as well as Shia Muslims. Despite being in majority, Shias had been oppressed and kept away from Iraq's power corridors. For Sunni extremists, the rise of the Shia – a natural consequence of Saddam's removal – was a hard reality to adjust to.

Many terrorist attacks and bombings were perpetrated by his Zarqawi group, including the bombing in 2006 of the Al-Askari Mosque, one of the highly revered holy sites for Shia Muslims. The attack on shrines led to the escalation of sectarian conflict in those years. Zarqawi was eliminated in 2006 in his hideout in the vicinity of Baghdad and group later changed its name to 'The Islamic State of Iraq' (ISI) and it seemed to grow more and more distant from Al-Qaeda. In 2010, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi became the group's leader. And during 2013, he declared that ISI merged with the Nusra Front to become the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS); also referred to as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), though the Nusra Front later denied the claim.[7] This led to increased tension between the two militant groups. In early February 2014, Al-Qaeda stated that ISIS was no longer a part of the Al-Qaeda organization, citing the group's "extreme" tendencies. This is quite comparable to what some analysts believe as regards the distancing between Al-Qaeda and Afghan Taliban. On June 29, 2014, Baghdadi changed the group's name again to the Islamic State (IS) and declared himself Caliph. The militant group gained international notoriety at that time but in fact, it had overrun Fallujah (approximately 40 miles west of Baghdad) in early January 2014. Since June/July 2014 the militant group has swept through many more areas in Iraq's North, raising serious security concerns regionally as well as globally.[8]

Interestingly, one of its first actions was the destruction of historic shrines revered greatly by both Sunni and Shia Muslims. Indiscriminate killing of non-Muslims, especially Christians and Yazidis, and massacres of Shia Muslims became a signature tactic while the ISIS campaign expanded towards Baghdad. This was a stark reminder of how the earlier version of the Wahhabi campaign had expanded its roots in the Arab lands between 1790 and 1815 with its raids in Medina, Syria and Karbala, only to be tackled and pushed back by Egyptians (on behalf of the Ottoman empire). [9]

Within the western policy community, the funding sources of ISIS are often attributed to individuals and organizations in Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait. Lately though, it seems that the political leadership in these states is trying hard to enforce strict checks to halt such trends. The Turkish role in this context is also considered controversial. Conspiracy theories among Arabs about US and Israeli support for ISIS are widely discussed on social media. Secret – and lately not so secret - Western support for anti-Syrian government armed groups has prompted such thinking. Although strong US air support to Iraqi forces trying to push back ISIS should dispel such theories. There is little doubt that without US air intervention the Kurdistan capital could not have been

saved. At present a 1500 strong US military contingent is on ground in Iraq helping Iraqi forces in training and strategizing.[10] Private Shia militias and some Iranian military commanders are also very active in the campaign to support Baghdad's efforts to regain territory.

In South Asia, the first signs of ISIS appeared in Srinagar, the capital of Indian controlled Kashmir, when after Eid prayers in late July 2014, a few masked young activists were seen waving the black banners of ISIS during a protest to condemn Israeli actions in Gaza.[11] It is unlikely that ISIS, from its Iraq base, was involved directly. These protestors were clearly using ISIS banners as symbols of defiance probably without realizing that it could advance both the brand and the cause of ISIS more than anything else. Around the same timeframe, ISIS gained Pakistan's attention when it publicly demanded the release of Aafia Siddiqui, a Pakistani scientist serving a jail term in the United States for terrorism related offences, in exchange for two American journalists who were later killed.[12] It was a propaganda stunt in which they signaled a clear South Asian interest, giving rise to the speculation that maybe an extremist of Pakistani origin was part of the ISIS' 'council of experts'.

ISIS in Pakistan: A Contested Space

The following factors are critical to understand the ideological and political linkage of this militant movement with Pakistan:

1. Dozens of Pakistanis had travelled to Syria in recent years to participate in the Syrian conflict and many of them shifted to the Iraq theatre in recent months. According to a July 2013 Associated Press story: "three Pakistani intelligence officials based in the tribal region that borders Afghanistan, as well as militants themselves, say the fighters leaving Pakistan for Syria include members of al-Qaida, the Pakistani Taliban and Suleman's group, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi."[13]This connection became more apparent in early August 2014, when Iraq's Ministry of Defense announced that Abdul Rahman al Amjad al Pakistani was among the handful of Islamic State fighters who were killed when Iraqi warplanes targeted a stronghold of ISIS in Mosul.[14]

2. Pakistan provides a ripe environment for potential growth of ISIS or similar groups in these arenas:

a) *Physical Space*: Pakistan does not merit comparison with Afghanistan or Iraq in terms of the space that militant and terrorist organizations have carved out for them in these states, but it is also an undeniable fact that various terrorist organizations gained substantial foothold in Pakistan over the last three decades. And these groups have greatly benefitted from the sanctuaries they were able to establish in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). It is well documented that Al-Qaeda and Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) conceived and masterminded their 'reign of terror' from their mobile bases in various parts of FATA area (especially the two Waziristan agencies), besides their smaller hubs in South Punjab, Quetta and Karachi. There is also a history of extensive collaboration between various terror outfits and criminal gangs in these areas and they distribute tasks among themselves depending on their logistical and network support across Pakistan. In a nutshell, tragically, Pakistani militants have successfully assimilated militants and criminals from around the world. ISIS too can try its luck, especially if they have sufficient funds – and all indications are that they have more funds then Al-Qaeda ever had. It is a well established fact that Al-Qaeda initially won the hearts of extremists and terrorists in Afghanistan and Pakistan through their pockets.[15]As regards ISIS financial capacity, it is good enough to rely on recent statement made by David Cohen, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Undersecretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence: "[ISIS] has amassed wealth at an unprecedented pace", and its "primary funding tactics enable it today to generate tens of millions of dollars per month. Those tactics include the sale of stolen oil, the ransoming of kidnap victims, theft and extortion from the people it currently dominates, and, to a lesser extent, donations from supporters outside of Syria and Iraq."[16]

b) *Ideological Space*: Troubling signs of religious bigotry and sectarianism in Pakistan are evident from general radicalization trends in the country.[17]Regional conflicts and authoritarian regimes in the country enabled such extremist tendencies to take root and in this journey decadent religious seminaries and poor quality of religious leadership played a central role. While religious minorities are increasingly being targeted, the rivalries within Sunni Islam, the majority sect, have also assumed dangerous and bloody dimensions. Reverence for Sufi teachings was amply reflected in the shade of Islam practiced in South Asia for over a thousand years but the shrines of these saints now are now among the most threatened of spaces. To put simply, for ISIS this can be deemed as friendly environment. A group of six influential TTP militants, including a former spokesperson, deciphered this well and announced allegiance to ISIS in October, 2014 raising questions about the cohesion of TTP in the face of ISIS' rising popularity.[18]According to a senior law enforcement official in Islamabad, another militant group comprising many former students of Abdul Rashid Ghazi of Islamabad's *Lal Masjid* (Red Mosque) fame is also under surveillance for its potential links with ISIS.[19] Insightfully, picture of Abdul Rashid Ghazi (who was killed in a military operation to clear the Red Mosque area) appeared in propaganda material used by the group 'Al-Qaeda in Iraq,' (which also include pictures of Syed Qutb, Hamas leaders and Zarqawi). According to experts, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi militants even had helped build the Ghazi Abdul Rashid training camp in the Iraqi city of Arbil in 2013.[20] The connection is deadly and real.

c) *Public and Social Space*: In the Pakistani context, poor governance, lack of policy planning in the counterterrorism arena and disconnect between state organs have allowed extremist and criminal networks to thrive. However, effective military operations in the Swat Valley (2009), South Waziristan (2010) and North Waziristan (2014) indicate that the state can enforce its writ. Where military action can do little is urban centers of Pakistan and even more so the social media. This domain requires resourceful and well trained law enforcement infrastructure that Pakistan sorely lacks. The problem becomes even more acute in the social media milieu. A study by a group of Italian academics indicates that around 35% of studied tweets and Facebook posts from Pakistan were sympathetic towards ISIS.[21]It is widely reported that ISIS logo and name have appeared in graffiti, posters and pamphlets across Pakistan.[22] In the August-September 2014 timeframe a booklet in Pashto titled *Fateh* (victory) with the images of the ISIS flag and Kalashnikov on its cover were distributed in parts of Pakistan's Khyber Pukhtunkhwa province and FATA areas. [23]A Pakistani group named 'Tehreek-e-Khilafat' – not known to have any connections with existing militant groups – announced its allegiance to ISIS in early July 2014 becoming the earliest non-Middle Eastern group to do so.[24]

d) *Legal Space*: In a state where registering a new name for a terror outfit that is banned is not difficult and where getting convicted, especially if you have committed an act of terror, is unlikely, no further major incentive is needed for any regional or international terrorist organization to open shop. The history of terror organizations in Pakistan, such as Jaish-e-Mohammad (JEM) for instance explains the point.[25]To be fair to law enforcement, it is not easy to profile militant groups given the frequency of   splintering of terrorist organizations in the country. In this backdrop, it was a surprise that Baluchistan government in a 'secret' memo reported to the federal government in Islamabad on October 30, 2014 that "ISIS has created a 10-man "strategic planning wing" with a master plan on how to wage war against the Pakistani military."[26]The report also mentioned the group's links with Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LEJ) and other associated sectarian groups for collaboration and claimed that it is actively and successfully recruiting in FATA. Given the common sectarian agenda of ISIS and LEJ, an alliance between them is only natural.[27] Some would argue the real consequent danger is that "Pakistan (through its deep reservoir of jihadists) could help strengthen the existing Islamic State abroad."[28]

How to confront ISIS impact in Pakistan?

In Iraq & Syria, ISIS operated as a hybrid between a conventional force and a terrorist outfit, which is not easy to target, whereas in Pakistan it is still largely an idea attracting militants who are already associated with terrorist groups - especially factions of TTP and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. When

it comes to terrorism, regional and global networking is not new to Pakistani militants. Pakistani militants are also in the habit of jumping from one group to another depending upon the resourcefulness and relevance of the group to prevailing conflict scene in the region. The worry is that ISIS can quickly establish its network in the country logistically. Getting recruits in a pool of thousands of illiterate, jobless and direction less millions is not a gigantic task. However, to create a niche in a milieu where a range of completing millenarian 'dreams' are offered, will be challenging. ISIS claims that it is establishing an Islamic Caliphate where justice will reign supreme in defiance of the West. The ideal it is projecting is not new but it can potentially craft a new template in the shape of a radical state that can provide an organized and secure sanctuary for terrorists from around the world. It has already created a new locus that is galvanizing radicals among Muslim groups across the world. The longer ISIS survives and sustains its momentum in Middle East, the harder it will be for states in the broader Middle East and South Asia to tackle the menace. To borrow from Graeme Wood's title of his article on Baghdadi, 'the longer he lives, the more powerful he becomes.'[29]

In Pakistan many leading religious scholars have started condemning all that ISIS stands for. For instance, Sunni scholars belonging to the Barelvi tradition were the first to issue a *fatwa* (religious edict) against the ISIS atrocities.[30] Another one from Pakistan Ulema Council (PUC) also exposed the terroristic mindset of ISIS strategists.[31] Similar public statements from political leaders were also well intentioned and clear. However, Pakistan's law enforcement and intelligence agencies are almost always behind the curve when it comes to understanding the domestic agendas of militant groups and counterterrorism measures. Delayed action is better than no action, but it fails to stop the terrorist network from expanding. TTP is now fragmenting, thanks to the effective targeting of its leadership in recent years but it raises a new challenge in its wake. The younger militants in TTP – currently displaced from their bases in South and North Waziristan - and disgruntled elements in various militant extremist groups in South Punjab and vibrant hubs of extremism in parts of Karachi, are on the lookout for new opportunities. The ISIS worldview can conveniently fill that vacuum.

It is also worth remembering that infighting in the TTP is caused by disputes over the issue of leadership and resource distribution. With Al-Qaeda far weaker than before, TTP factions are looking for new sponsors. The ISIS' operational tactics, focused on establishing control over territory even if it means sharing power with local political actors – like with Baathists in Iraq's Mosul - has created a new model that many of the budding terrorists in Pakistan would like to follow. It is also worth acknowledging that if Al-Qaeda is 'concerned' – as evident from Zawahiri's decision to open up a new franchise, titled 'Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent' in September 2014 - arguably to counter ISIS inroads into South Asia - then the state of Pakistan should also worry. The generational shift taking place among the Taliban themselves – both Afghan and Pakistani - can tilt the balance in favor of more radicalized cadres of militants.[32]ISIS can also mutate into some other shape in few years – more fierce and unyielding – and yet more adaptive to changing scenarios in the Middle East, especially after a succession crisis in any of the leading Arab and Gulf states.

In the Pakistani context, civilian law enforcement and military need to collaborate more in trying to understand the nature of this emerging threat scenario and also engage the public in terms of creating awareness about the threat posed by ISIS to religious harmony and to the very idea of the state of Pakistan. Only a research oriented and modern law enforcement structure can develop grounded policy analysis and recommend effective countermeasures to political government. The ISIS challenge in Pakistan is more serious than what the Pakistani leadership is ready to admit, but dealing with it will require learning lessons from how militant groups in league with their political wings operated in Pakistan over the last three decades and how short sighted policy choices led Pakistan into troubled waters. As the horrendous terror attack in Peshawar targeting school children shows, Pakistan's security landscape remains hazy. In the absence of a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy, any substantial improvement in law and order situation is unlikely. Pakistan needs to avoid mistakes committed in the past.

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