



# BETWEEN WAR & PEACE

THE AFGHANISTAN ESSAYS

Daesh in Afghanistan  
Zahid Hussain

## The Afghanistan Essays

This 2018 short-essay series by the Jinnah Institute (JI) reflects a range of Pakistani thought leadership on Afghanistan and its complex history with Islamabad. With the region in the current crosshairs of a seemingly intractable conflict, these essays attempt to spur old and new thinking on the history of Pakistan's relationship with Afghanistan and existing challenges. The essays cover a range of subject matter on Afghanistan-Pakistan including efforts for peace and reconciliation, threats to security, the broader geopolitical dynamic, and the role of civil society and economy.

This essay titled 'Daesh in Afghanistan' situates the emergence of Daesh and the implications of its militant politics in the wider Afghan conflict, and the perils it presents for regional peace and stability. In particular, it poses questions about the group's organisational prospects in an increasingly contested militant landscape, as well as security concerns for Pakistan.

## About the Author

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# DAESH IN AFGHANISTAN

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## Introduction

The rise of Daesh, the group otherwise known as the Islamic State, represents a new, violent and dangerous twist in the ongoing insurgency in Afghanistan. Over the past few years, this Middle-East inspired terrorist group, opposed to both the Taliban and the Afghan government, has claimed responsibility for a series of high profile suicide attacks in the Afghan capital Kabul and other parts of the war torn country.

Even more alarming are reports of Taliban factions in Northern Afghanistan – a region that has witnessed a dramatic rise in insurgent violence - switching their allegiance to Daesh. In mid-2017, Daesh overran several districts of northern Jowzjan Province and have further strengthened their position in the region by winning the support of middle rank Taliban commanders. Jowzjan is a remote province that has long been a battleground between the government and the Taliban, with local warlords switching allegiances frequently. This represents a new front for Daesh which had hitherto been limited in its influence to the remote and inaccessible eastern province of Nangarhar.

Also known as the Islamic State in Khorasan, the group's fighters have long battled the government and the Taliban in the country's eastern province of Nangarhar, with a stronghold in Achin district. In early 2017 the group took control of Tora Bora mountain redoubts from the Taliban. The treacherous mountainous terrain was once a sanctuary of Osama bin Laden.

Daesh fighters, estimated to be around 1,000 in number, are reported to be better equipped and better funded than the Taliban. Despite US drone strikes having killed several senior commanders and the employment of the world's largest non-nuclear bomb on their stronghold, Daesh has grown from strength to strength in eastern Afghanistan and created inroads in other regions.

The militant group is also drawing greater appeal among younger fighters impatient with the progress of the 15-year insurgency in Afghanistan. Money too is helping Daesh recruit from a younger generation of militants. The group reportedly offers a signing bonus of \$400 to \$500, a large sum in a country where a lack of job prospects has fuelled a new wave of youth emigration.

The Islamic State in Khorasan, as the militants in Afghanistan and Pakistan are known, has no direct connection with Al Qaeda, which is largely a spent force in the area. But the Daesh in Khorasan was originally formed by Al Qaeda elements and the two groups have several doctrinal similarities. Therefore, Daesh represents more of a splintering of the Taliban than a major expansion of the core group out of Syria and Iraq.

## The Emergence of Daesh

The first signs of Daesh getting organised in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region emerged as early as 2014. Leaflets urging fighters belonging to the Taliban and other Afghan insurgent groups to join the Middle East based militant group appeared in various districts. These appeals were posted not only in eastern Afghanistan, along the border with Pakistan, but also in Kabul. Daesh literature was also found in Afghan refugee camps in Peshawar. This coincided with Daesh's spectacular territorial gains in Iraq and Syria, allowing the group to establish a so-called Caliphate in territories under its control.

Early Daesh recruits came from the ranks of splinter factions of the Pakistani Taliban who had been driven into Afghanistan after large scale operations in the Tribal region by Pakistan army. Fighters waving black Daesh flags and wearing their signature black masks were spotted in several districts of Eastern Afghanistan. Many of these fighters spoke Dari, Pashtu and Punjabi. Spurred by the declaration of a Caliphate by Abu Bakar Al Baghdadi, several smaller militant groups in Pakistan and Afghanistan pledged their allegiance to the group. Among those were Ansar ul-Khilafat Wal-Jihad, and Jundullah - a splinter group of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

In September 2014, Daesh named Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost – a former Afghan Taliban commander from Kunar province – as an organiser for the group's Khorasan chapter. A prominent Salafi jihadist scholar, Muslim Dost enjoyed significant following among Salafis in eastern provinces like Kunar and Nuristan. His initial responsibility was to recruit militants to fight along Daesh in Iraq and Syria.

Some high profile defections of Afghan Taliban commanders helped the group create a formal organisational structure. They were joined by some TTP dissidents who had left the group over disagreement on the appointment of Mullah Fazlullah as leader, following the death of Hakimullah Mehsud in 2013.

In January 2015, the group released a video proclaiming themselves the administrators of an official wilayat (or province) for Daesh in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The creation of the Shura for Khorasan (the historic name of the region including Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia) was endorsed by the Daesh supreme command. It named former TTP commander of Orakzai Agency in Pakistan, Hafiz Saeed Khan, as the emir for Daesh in the Khorasan region and Mullah Abdul Rauf, a former Afghan Taliban commander who had spent many years in Guantanamo, as his deputy.

The declaration galvanized the group's activities and helped mobilise support among various militant groups operating on both sides of Pak-Afghan border. Initially, Daesh focussed on Afghanistan's eastern provinces of Kunar and Nangarhar, where many Pakistani Taliban commanders fleeing the military operation in the tribal areas had settled. Mullah Abdul Rauf organised the group in southern Afghanistan. Soon after the formation of its Khorasan chapter, Daesh was active in eleven provinces of Afghanistan including in Ghazni and Logar. In most cases, defections from Taliban to Daesh were motivated by the group's huge financial resources rather than its radical and rigid worldview and ideology. Fighters were supplied with laptops, pickup trucks, and financial support was extended to their families.

There were also reports of foreign fighters, many with ties to local leadership entering Afghanistan in large numbers by early 2015. Some of them came with their families and settled in the southeast provinces including Paktika and Ghazni. Most of these foreign fighters were militants pushed out by military operations by Pakistani forces in North Waziristan.

One of the largest of Pakistan's tribal agencies, North Waziristan had long become a sanctuary of militants groups – both Pakistani and foreign. After prolonged international and local pressure, Pakistani forces started an operation in the area in mid-2014 forcing thousands of foreign militants to cross over into Afghanistan. A large number of them were Uzbeks belonging to Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Some even moved to northern Afghan provinces of Faryab and Kunduz. The influx of Uzbeks gave huge impetus to the insurgency in these areas of Northern Afghanistan which had remained relatively peaceful until 2014.

Foreign fighters aligned with Daesh adopted brutal tactics, emulating the group's practices in Iraq and Syria. They extended their attacks on the Shia community in Afghanistan. This resulted in an unprecedented rise in suicide attacks on Shia places of worship, with huge civilian casualties. Such attacks had rarely been seen in Afghanistan before and bore the trademark of Daesh operations elsewhere.

Most of these recent sectarian inspired attacks in Afghanistan are suspected to be carried out by Uzbeks. One objective of such high profile attacks that caused large civilian casualties was to draw international and national attention to Daesh activities. Within a year of its formation, the group was able to carry out operations throughout Afghanistan and demonstrated its capacity to infiltrate and attack populated areas. The terrorist group was also responsible for the attack on the Pakistani consulate in provincial capital Jalalabad in January 2016.

## Daesh Versus Taliban

In order to establish a foothold in Afghanistan, Daesh has run a concerted propaganda campaign to discredit both the Taliban and Al Qaeda. In a statement Abu Bakar Al Baghdadi accused the Taliban of preaching a "distorted version of Islam". The article also referred to Mullah Muhammad Omar, the founder of Afghan Taliban movement and its late supreme leader, as "a fool and an illiterate warlord." He asserted that Mullah Omar's "nationalist, territorial" approach to jihad in Afghanistan was hindering the Islamic State's global mission.

Daesh ramped up its propaganda against the Afghan Taliban leadership after the disclosure of Mullah Omar's death. To promote defections, Daesh accused the Taliban leadership council also known as the "Quetta Shura" of hiding the death of Mullah Omar and lying to its cadres. Daesh spokesmen accused the Afghan Taliban of being agents of Pakistan's spy agency, the Inter Services Directorate (ISI) as well as "apostates of Iran". They particularly targeted Mullah Akhtar Mansoor, the successor of Mullah Omar as the supreme leader of the Afghan Taliban movement.

Despite all its resources, intense propaganda and initial success in managing defections of some second and lower level Taliban commanders, the terrorist group failed to break up the Taliban movement or encourage large scale defections. A major reason for this failure to make inroads into Taliban strongholds was the perception of Daesh being a foreign entity. It was not that the so-called Khorasan Shura was implanted from outside and that Afghans were not part of it, but that the international jihadi ideology espoused by Daesh and its aim of establishing a global Caliphate of Muslims was in divergence to the Taliban's limited national objectives of liberating the country from occupation forces.

Even the argument offered by local Daesh leadership that their struggle was limited to the larger Khorasan region could not convince Taliban commanders. The label of a foreign entity has also been a major cause of Daesh failure to draw support from the local Afghan population in the areas under

Taliban influence. Daesh has found it difficult to dislodge the Taliban who have been fighting on the ground and have been part of society for the past two decades enjoying strong tribal connections.

For these reasons, Daesh attempts to penetrate into Taliban strongholds faced strong resistance. This led to fierce fighting in various parts of Afghanistan, particularly in Helmand where Mullah Rauf Khadim was leading Daesh. He was later killed in a US drone strike. Hafiz Saeed, the emir of the Khorasan chapter was also killed in Nangarhar in a drone strike dealing serious blow to Daesh while it was in its formative stage. Although the militant group failed to break into Taliban strongholds in Afghanistan, it nevertheless managed to recruit fighters among other militant groups operating on both sides of the Durand line.

Indeed the emergence of Daesh in Afghanistan is alarming and presents a serious challenge to the Kabul government. But there is no sign of it overshadowing the Taliban as the main insurgent group in Afghanistan. Reliance on brutal actions and its targeting of the civilian population has alienated Afghans. The defeat of Daesh in Iraq and Syria has also affected the militant group's operations in Afghanistan. The loss of territorial control over oil rich regions has dried up funding for the Khorasan chapter as well.

The routing of Daesh in the Middle East has also forced the Khorasan chapter to change its tactics. Instead of trying to establish territorial control, the group has increasingly been resorting to terrorist actions. The only hope for Daesh to successfully resurge is if the Taliban are fragmented. But this does not seem to be happening. In fact, the Taliban have managed to push back and regain control of some of the areas in Nangarhar province. While one must not underestimate the advance of Daesh in parts of Afghanistan, for now it would seem that Daesh has been unable to make the kind of gains it had in Iraq and Syria.