

IS Penetration in Afghanistan-Pakistan: Assessment, Impact and Implications

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Abstract

Since the inception of the Islamic State (IS) terrorist group, the jihadist landscape in Afghanistan and Pakistan (Af-Pak) has transformed subtly. IS has captured the imagination of the younger generation of jihadists in the two countries, triggering defections in the form of allegiances to the so-called caliphate. This has resulted in turf wars between IS and the Taliban-Al-Qaeda duo over recruitment, resources and the loyalties of the local militant groups. The Af-Pak jihadist groups have responded to IS efforts to penetrate the jihadist community with open rejection of the caliphate or its acceptance as well as adopting a hedging attitude. This article maps out IS presence in the two countries and its operational capabilities. IS has forged alliances with like-minded Sunni extremist groups and cultivated ideological constituency among the educated urban youth. This has complicated the militant landscape, contributed to the expansion of Sunni-Shia conflict and lowered the threshold of online radicalization.

Key words: Khurasan, Islamic State, Al-Qaeda, Taliban, Afghanistan, Pakistan

Introduction

Following its rise on the global jihadist landscape in 2014, the Islamic State (IS) terrorist group gained the support of some disillusioned factions of Islamist militant groups in the Af-Pak region.[1] IS also found appeal among the university-educated radicalized youth of the urban middle and upper middle classes. [2] However, unlike its gains in the Middle East, IS's foothold in Afghanistan and Pakistan has been rather limited.[3]

The first evidence of IS's presence as an organization in the Af-Pak region emerged on January 11, 2015 when the group announced formation of its so-called *Wilayat Khurasan*. A former Pakistani Taliban commander Hafiz Saeed Khan Orakzai was appointed as its *emir* (head) and an ex-Afghan Taliban commander Abdul Rauf Khadim as the deputy *emir* .[4] Prior to that, signs of IS's attraction among the jihadists in Pakistan had surfaced in November 2014, when Pakistan's National Counter Terrorism Authority (NCTA) wrote a letter to various government agencies warning them to be vigilant of IS's growing influence. The letter noted, "The successes of IS plays a very dangerous, inspirational role in Pakistan, where more than 200 (terrorist) organisations are operational." [5]

Since then, six militant groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan have either pledged allegiances to IS or forged partnerships with it. In Afghanistan, the Central Asian militant group Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) declared its support for IS in October 2014.[6] In Pakistan, Tehrik-e-Khilafat[7], Jandullah[8], and the Bajaur faction of the Pakistani Taliban[9] have pledged allegiances, while Lashkar-e-Jhangvi Al-Alami[10], Lashkar-e-Islam[11] and Jamaat-ul-Ahrar[12] have forged tactical and transactional alliances.

Policy-makers and terrorism experts differ widely about the scale and nature of IS ingress in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Some are dismissive of the group's presence in the region, while others exaggerate its capabilities and potential threat. Against this backdrop, it is essential to analyse IS's operational strengths in order to assess what kind of threat it poses to the Af-Pak region. There are at least two contending schools of thought on this issue.

One school of thought dismisses any systematic and organized presence of IS in the region. This school argues that the discussion of IS's influence among jihadist groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan has been

over-hyped. It believes the following four factors have hindered IS efforts to gain a sizeable foothold in Afghanistan and Pakistan.[13] First, IS is an outsider to the region: linguistic, cultural, and geographical barriers have hampered its growth among the Af-Pak jihadist community. Second, in the presence of well-established jihadist movements—such as the Afghan Taliban, Al-Qaeda and the Kashmiri militant groups—there is no space for IS to grow. Third, IS's pro-Caliphate propaganda is over simplistic and detached from the ground realities and local conflicts in the region.[14] And finally, IS is a group defined by its Salafi-Takfiri-Jihadist ideology, while most of the militant outfits in Afghanistan and Pakistan are followers of Deobandi-Hanafism, a puritanical branch of Sunni Islam in South Asia. According to this perspective, the limited appeal of the Salafi-Takfiri-Jihadist ideology in the region has also constrained IS's appeal.[15]

A second school of thought contends that undermining IS's threat in Afghanistan and Pakistan is fraught with security risks. Proponents of this view argue that, short of challenging major militant groups in the region, IS has found a constituency among the new generation of jihadists in Afghanistan and Pakistan. [16] This new so-called 'fourth generation' of jihadists includes mainly college and university educated radicalized youth from middle and upper-middle classes of urban areas.[17] Furthermore, the easily available ungoverned spaces (physical sanctuaries), conducive environmental factors which assist in growth of extremist ideologies (social sanctuary), and a large youth cohort susceptible to militant recruitment (demographic sanctuary) make Afghanistan and Pakistan attractive for the IS.[18]

Considering the territorial losses, infrastructure damages and depleting finances in Iraq and Syria, many observers have suggested that IS may turn its attention towards its so-called *Wilayats* in order to survive. Following its potential implosion in the Levant, *Wilayat Khurasan* (among others) is a viable fall-back option for IS. This article posits that in the last three years, IS has created enough of a footprint in northeastern Afghanistan and southwestern Pakistan to carry out large-scale attacks in both countries.

The relocation of some of its fighters and commanders from Iraq and Syria will further augment the operational capabilities and organizational strengths of IS affiliates in the Af-Pak region. Based on a host of primary and secondary sources—such as IS propaganda literature distributed in different parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan and video transcripts of various militant groups who have pledged allegiance to IS, as well as various research studies, newspaper reports and articles regarding IS activities in the two countries—the following sections of this article explain the nature and scale of IS activities in Afghanistan and Pakistan, reactions of major jihadist movements in the two countries to the growth of IS, and the implications of these developments for regional security.

Why Afghanistan and Pakistan are Important for IS

Before exploring the IS network of affiliates (militant factions that have pledged allegiances), supporters (self-radicalised urban cells) and sympathizers (lone-wolf fighters) in Afghanistan and Pakistan, it is imperative to understand the ideological and strategic factors which make these two countries attractive to the terrorist group.

The Black Flags of Khurasan

After the emir of IS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, declared his self-styled caliphate from Mosul, Iraq, the group released a map online of its five-year expansion plan. It showed Pakistan and Afghanistan as part of its Khurasan province, which also includes Iran, Central Asia and some parts of western China.[19] The inclusion of the Af-Pak region in the map has historical reasons.[20] (See *Figure 1*).

Figure 1: Map showing IS five-year expansionist plan for the caliphate



Source: URL: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2674736/ISIS-militants-declare-formation-caliphate-Syria-Iraq-demand-Muslims-world-swear-allegiance.html>

As a concept, Khurasan is an apocalyptic vision that drives many Sunni radical groups around the world with a belief that at the onset of the End of Times, an army of the *Mujahideen* (Islamist fighters) carrying black flags will rise from Central Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan.[21] This narrative has been supported by a saying of the Prophet Muhammad narrated by the classical Hadith scholar Ibne Majah (570-632), which talks about the carriers of black banners or flags from the land of Khurasan representing true Islamic believers towards the End of Times. He reported that the Prophet said, “If you see the Black Banners coming from Khurasan go to them immediately, even if you must crawl over ice, because indeed amongst them is the Caliph, Al Mahdi [the Messiah]...and no one can stop that army until it reaches Jerusalem.” It is worth mentioning, though, that some Islamic scholars contest the authority of this *hadith*.[22]

Because of this *hadith*, jihadists believe that Afghanistan-Pakistan region is the place from where they will inflict a major defeat against their enemies in the Islamic version of the Armageddon. This army of the *mujahideen* will help revive the global Islamic caliphate and Muslims will once again become the global leaders.[23] Ultimately, according to this utopian vision, this movement will lead to the End of Time (Day of Judgement) as a result of a battle between ‘good and evil forces,’ where the latter will be defeated and God’s judgement will come to pass.[24]

Af-Pak, Al-Qaeda’s Birthplace

Since its inception in 1988, Al-Qaeda Central (AQC) has considered Afghanistan and Pakistan region as its home and power bastion. Current Al-Qaeda Chief Ayman Al-Zawahiri is still thought to maintain residence in the Afghanistan-Pakistan tribal region.[25] According to a *Newsweek* report, Zawahiri narrowly escaped a US drone attack in January 2016 in the Shawal Valley near the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region.[26]

The majority of the militant groups in the two countries remain loyal to Al-Qaeda central, which still maintains close ties with Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Harkat-ul-Jihad-ul-Islami (HuJI), the Haqqani Network, and Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM).[27]

One measure of that is the reaffirmation of allegiances by Zawahiri to two new Taliban chiefs in 2015 and 2016. In the first instance, Zawahiri renewed his loyalty to Mullah Umar’s successor Akhtar Muhammad Mansoor in August 2015.[28] Mansoor welcomed Al-Qaeda’s allegiance to bolster his legitimacy and position

within the Taliban movement, amidst a bloody leadership transition.[29] The second oath of allegiance came in 2016, following Mansoor's killing in a US drone attack near Balochistan[30], and the appointment of Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada as the new Taliban chief.[31]

A Conducive Environment for the Growth of Extremist Ideologies

The easily available ungoverned spaces, weak government institutions, disenfranchised periphery population and prevalent anti-Western and American sentiments make Afghanistan and Pakistan suitable places for the incubation and spread of extremist ideologies.[32]

IS's message of creating a Sunni Muslim Caliphate has won itself the sympathies and support of at least six like-minded jihadist groups in the Af-Pak region (as mentioned above), along with isolated pockets of support in the form of self-radicalised individuals (lone wolves) and cells. These pro-IS individuals and cells have been involved in terrorist attacks, recruitment, fundraising and distribution of IS's extremist propaganda in different parts of the two countries.[33]

For instance, in 2015 a group of pro-IS female militants was nabbed in Karachi for fundraising, matchmaking and distributing pamphlets and CDs containing IS propaganda material.[34] The members of this group hailed from educated and wealthy families.[35] Likewise, another female wing of IS militants was discovered in Karachi in January 2016, following the arrest of an important IS Commander, Kamran Gujjar, in the port city. His wife and sister-in-law were working for IS and they were involved in recruitment and propaganda operations.[36]

In December 2015, another cell of female radicals working for the IS "Bushra Network" was discovered in Lahore. The authorities came to know about this cell after a report of a missing girl was lodged with the local police. The ensuing investigation revealed that an IS-recruiter, Burshra Cheema, had relocated her to Syria with 20 others. Bushra—a religious scholar with an M. Phil in Islamic Studies from the Punjab University—ran an Islamic school, the Noor-ul-Hudaa Islamic Center, in Lahore. She got in touch with IS operatives in Syria through social media. Currently, she lives in Syria with her children.[37]

Additionally, two terrorist cells that defected to IS from Jamaat-ud-Dawn (JuD) were busted in Lahore and Sialkot in 2015[38] and 2016[39], respectively. Another IS-cell involved in a series of high-profile attacks was neutralised in Karachi in 2014, following the attack on a bus carrying members of the Ismaili Shia community. The attackers left leaflets announcing the arrival of IS in Pakistan. The post-attack investigation led to the arrests of the attack mastermind Saad Aziz and his associates—Hafiz Rashid and Tahir Minhas—who were university graduates and belonged to middle and upper middle class families.[40] The group is also known as the Tahir Saeen Group.[41] Similarly, in November 2016, Punjab's Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) neutralised an eight-members cell of IS in Lahore. The cell was involved in the propagation of IS ideology on social media, and also sent 14 aspiring jihadists to Syria.[42] In the first four months of 2017, as many as six IS cells have been busted in eastern Punjab province.[43]

Links of Afghan and Pakistani Jihadists with Conflicts in Iraq and Syria

Jihadists from Afghanistan and Pakistan have been travelling to Syria since 2013 to participate in the Syrian civil war.[44] Later, many of them shifted to the Iraqi theatre. The Pakistani Taliban established their camp in Syria in 2012. Initially, 12 trainers from the Pakistani Taliban having expertise in bomb-making and information technology moved to Syria. Later, fresh recruits from different parts of the country joined them. [45]

Similarly, a militant training camp named after a deceased Pakistani jihadist, Abdul Rashid Ghazi, was created in Iraq's Irbil city in 2013, assisted by the anti-Shia Pakistani militant group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. Abdul Rashid Ghazi, along with his elder brother Abdul Aziz, had spearheaded an anti-state uprising of madrassa

students in Pakistan's capital Islamabad in the winter of 2007. Ghazi was killed in a military operation later that year.[46]

This link became clearer in August 2014 when a statement from Iraq's Defence Ministry announced the death of IS-allied Pakistani jihadist Abdul Rahman Amjad Al-Pakistani in the Iraqi military's airstrikes within the IS-stronghold in Mosul.[47] Al-Pakistani, also known as Al-Punjabi, was a former Al-Qaeda commander. He had defected to IS in March 2014 along with eight other leaders.[48]

IS Network in Afghanistan and Pakistan

Presently, the Islamic State of Khurasan (ISK)—IS's Af-Pak affiliate—is headquartered in Afghanistan's eastern Nangarhar province. Initially, ISK spread its tentacles to nine districts of Nangarhar, but its presence has now been reduced to three districts (Achin, Deh Bala and Chaparhar).[49] Currently, there are 1,000 to 1,500 fighters—Afghans, Pakistanis, Indians (22)[50] and a few Arabs—in its ranks.[51] If the Central Asian fighters of the IMU are combined with this figure, the approximate strength of ISK would be 2,500 to 3,000. According to a report of United State Institute of Peace, as of April 2016, ISK had around 2,500 jihadists in its ranks.[52] Similarly, a report of the UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team puts the number of ISK fighters in Afghanistan between 2,000 and 3,500.[53] According to General John Nicholson, commander of US forces in Afghanistan, almost 70 percent of ISK fighters in Afghanistan are Pakistani Taliban who joined the group after being pushed out of Pakistani tribal areas in counter terrorism operations.[54]

US airstrikes, ground operations of the Afghan forces, and inter-group fighting with the Afghan Taliban in Nangarhar has compelled ISK to move some of its fighters and commanders to eastern Afghanistan's Kunar province where Salafist influence is rather strong.[55] The group has significant pockets of influence in southern Zabul province as well; most of the fighters here are Central Asians.[56]

Meanwhile, in Pakistan, ISK has no significant organizational presence. However, as mentioned above, isolated supporters—self-radicalised cells and individuals—are present in urban centres of the country, such as Karachi, Lahore, Sialkot and Hyderabad. The other node of IS presence in Pakistan is its alliances with like-minded militant groups, such as LJA, Jandullah and JuA.

Presently ISK is leaderless—both Saeed (first emir) and Khadim (the deputy emir) have been killed in US drone strikes in Afghanistan. Saeed's successor Maulvi Abdul Hasib Logari has likely been killed in a joint operation by the US and Afghan forces in the Nangarhar province as well.[57]

Prior to the appointment of commander Saeed Khan as ISK's head, a former Afghan jihadist and ex-Guantanamo detainee, Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost, was the architect behind the pro-IS graffiti campaign in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The 50-year old Rahim is a Salafi Islamic scholar from Afghanistan's Nangarhar province.[58] Another former Afghan jihadist, Maulvi Abdul Qahar Khurasani, helped Muslim Dost in spreading IS influence in the region.[59] Rahim and Qahar pledged allegiance to IS on 1 July 2014, just two days after Baghdadi pronounced his self-styled caliphate.[60]

Retrospectively, the first signs of a cell working for IS in Afghanistan and Pakistan surfaced in September 2014, with the appearance of pro-IS slogans and distribution of propaganda literature in different parts of the two countries.[61] However, the formal announcement of ISK's creation was only made on 27 January 2015 by IS spokesperson Abu Muhammad Al-Adnani in IS' English magazine *Dabiq*. [62]

IS Recruitment in Afghanistan and Pakistan

In Pakistan, IS has focused on recruiting university students and professionals (engineers, doctors, lawyers, journalists and businessmen) along with using females for fundraising.[63] Most of these recruits have been

targeted and radicalized online.[64] Professionals can be utilised in leadership positions or run the group's powerful propaganda operations, which includes producing high-quality videos, social media campaigns and various publications which are churned out in multiple languages.[65]

Meanwhile, in Afghanistan IS has recruited from existing militant groups, and in 2015 launched a radio station in eastern parts of the country to attract new recruits. The Pashtu language broadcast "Voice of Caliphate" spanned over ninety minutes daily and included interviews, messages, *nasheeds* (songs) and lectures about the Islamic State. It encouraged youth to find a sense of direction in their lives by joining the group.[66] IS has also been recruiting people quite actively from Kunar province.[67]

According to the London-based International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (ICSR), as many as 350-400 Pakistani and Afghan fighters have gone to fight alongside IS in Iraq and Syria. [68] Of this figure, 50 are Afghans and around 350 are Pakistanis. Meanwhile, the official number given by Pakistan's National Crisis Management Cell (NCMC), as of August 2016, is approximately 650.[69]

In October 2014, the Home Ministry of Pakistan's Balochistan province wrote a confidential memo to the federal government and other Pakistani law enforcement agencies, warning them to be vigilant of the increasing influence of IS in the province. The report, which was leaked to the media, noted that members of the IS cell were trying to recruit from KP's Bannu district and the Pakistani tribal areas.[70]

In November 2014, a three-member IS delegation led by Al-Zubair Al-Kuwaiti entered Pakistan's south-western Balochistan province where they met with the leaders of Pakistani Taliban's splinter group Jandullah. According to Jandullah's spokesperson Fahad Marwat, "The purpose of the visit by the Islamic State group was to see how it could work to unite various Pakistani militant groups." [71] Six days after this meeting, Jandullah pledged allegiance to IS maintaining that: "They (Islamic State) are our brothers, whatever plan they have we will support them." [72]

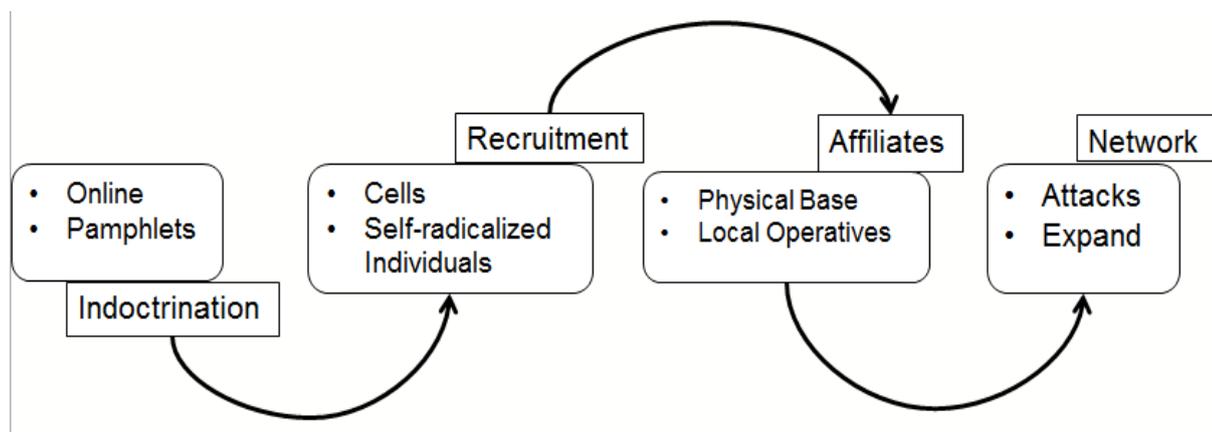
(See Annex 1 & 2 for the profiles of the groups and individuals who have pledged allegiance to IS in Afghanistan and Pakistan.)

Four-phase Progression of IS in Afghanistan and Pakistan

Chronologically, there has been a non-linear progression of IS in Afghanistan and Pakistan in four phases. In the first phase, IS promoted its brand of global Salafi-Takfiri-Jihadist ideology and propagated its extremist worldview through distribution of online propaganda material, pamphlets and booklets. For instance, in September 2014, IS supporters distributed a pamphlet entitled *Fatah* (Victory) in Peshawar and bordering areas of Afghanistan.[73] Written in Pashtu and Dari languages, the magazine contained articles that aimed to recruit the jihadists into IS and to spread the group's extremist ideology.[74] The pamphlet maintained that IS was not only focusing on the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, but also intends to spread its influence over the Indian subcontinent.[75]

In the second phase, the would-be radicals were encouraged to perform the so-called *hijrah* (migration) to IS-controlled territories.[76] This was done through online recruitment and intermediaries. The third phase involved declaring the *Wilayat Khurasan* and establishing a sanctuary in eastern Afghanistan to further expedite the recruitment process and impart militant training to fighters for future attacks. The fourth and current phase has been aimed at mustering enough manpower and operational strength to carry out large-scale attacks both in Afghanistan and Pakistan.[77] *(See Figure 2)*

Figure 2: Four-phase progression of IS in Afghanistan-Pakistan



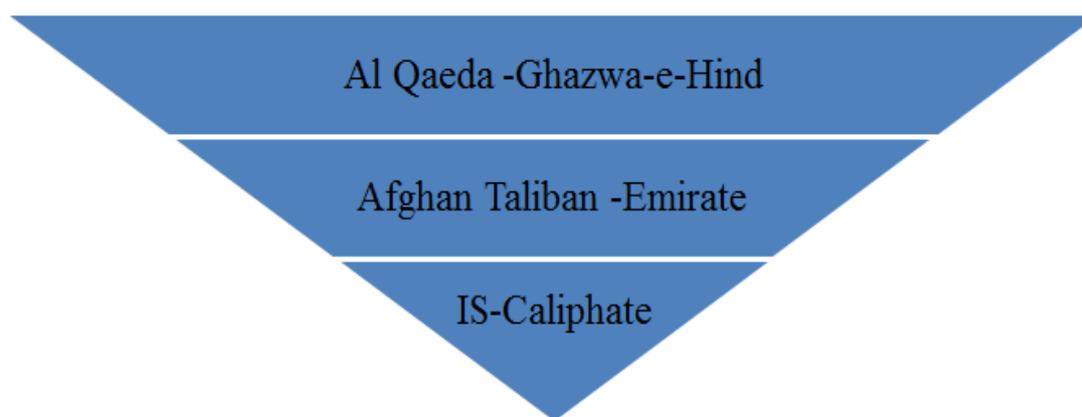
Source: <http://www.slideshare.net/RahulBhonsle/how-isis-and-aqis-expand-in-indian-sub-continent>

Responses of Militant Organizations in Afghanistan-Pakistan to IS Growth

The Af-Pak jihadist groups have responded to IS efforts to spread its tentacles in the region in three broad ways: a) renewing commitment to old ideologies and rejecting IS; b) jumping on the IS bandwagon; or c) adopting a hedging attitude.[78]

Taking into account the aforementioned reactions to IS’s jihadist vision, arguably there are now three jihadist models available to the militant groups in Afghanistan-Pakistan: the IS propounded caliphate model, the Al-Qaeda espoused *Ghazwa-e-Hind* (Battle of India) for South Asia, and the Afghan Taliban’s Islamic Emirate model.

Figure 3: Three Models of Jihad in Afghanistan-Pakistan



The *hadith Ghazwa-e-Hind* contains a prophecy of a great battle towards the End of Times in the Indian sub-continent between true believers and non-believers. The references have been used by Al-Qaeda when it launched its South Asian branch (AQIS) in September 2014.[79] By lumping South Asia with its jihadist narrative as an important battleground, Al-Qaeda has tried to retain the sympathies of the local militant organization in the region.[80]

Meanwhile, the IS approach to jihad centres around the idea of holding territory—i.e., the creation of a Caliphate that can be used as a base to spread influence transnationally in the form of *Wilayats*. Moreover, IS focuses on the “near-enemy” (the apostate Muslim regimes of the Middle East) as opposed to Al-Qaeda’s strategy of targeting the “far-enemy” (the US and its Western allies). Also, Al-Qaeda and IS differ over who is the true successor of Osama bin Laden–Zawahiri or Baghdadi. Additionally, Al-Qaeda, unlike IS, opposes brazenly violent tactics against Shia Muslims and other religious minorities, like Yazidis and Kurds.[81]

Strategically, Al-Qaeda favours a gradualist approach to jihad by preparing society to accept its version of the Islamic state. In theory, Al-Qaeda supports a caliphate—but as a long-term goal. In other words, the creation of a caliphate is an end-point of the jihadist struggle for Al-Qaeda, while it is the starting point for IS.[82] This is why Al-Qaeda prefers to work through local jihadist affiliates by providing them its ideological umbrella. Meanwhile, the Afghan Taliban has a limited focus confined to Islamization of Afghanistan. The jihadist movement has categorically maintained having no ambitions outside Afghanistan.

Reaffirming Commitment to Old Loyalties

The rise of IS transiently disturbed the jihadist landscape in Afghanistan and Pakistan.[83] The broader context of these reverberations was the changing dynamics of the competition between Al-Qaeda and IS for the leadership of a global jihadist movement.[84] Al-Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban and TTP categorically rejected IS’ message of the Caliphate.

TTP disowned those commanders and splinter groups that pledged allegiance to IS.[85] Additionally, in May 2015 TTP released a 60-page statement rebutting IS leader Baghdadi’s claim to head a caliphate through its official propaganda wing, Umar media. TTP jihadist Abu Usman Salarzai wrote the statement in which he exposed errors in Baghdadi’s claim to be the new caliph.[86]

While the Afghan Taliban outgunned and outnumbered ISK during the embryonic phase of the latter’s emergence, the Taliban felt the pinch of its growing ideological appeal in their backyard. In June 2014, then-leader of the Afghan Taliban Akhtar Mansoor wrote a fourteen-page letter to IS leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, warning him to stay out of Afghanistan. Mansoor maintained in the letter, “Jihadi groups across the Muslim world are struggling for Islam and they have their own organizational structure. If your meddling in their affairs creates division, it will result in bloodshed within these organizations.”[87]

In October 2015, the Afghan Taliban also constituted a special task force comprising of well-equipped 1,000 fighters to avert further defections to IS. The fighters allocated to this unit were better trained than regular Taliban, and their sole aim was to crush IS.[88]

Meanwhile, in reaction to IS’s ingress in the Af-Pak region, Al-Qaeda chief Ayman Al-Zawahiri announced the formation of Al-Qaeda’s South Asia branch, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), in September 2014. Al-Qaeda exploited local issues, such as the oppression of Muslims in the Indian-administered Kashmir and in Myanmar to counter IS influence. On the other hand, IS offered the same audience its so-called caliphate model as a solution to oppression.[89]

Al-Qaeda has been trying to keep its preponderant position as the vanguard of the global jihadist movement in the Af-Pak region intact, while IS effort is focused on making a larger impact in the region. Al-Qaeda’s aim is to contain IS’ expansion by keeping its current network of affiliates intact. IS, on the other hand, relies on its brand popularity as a tool to win loyalties of the local jihadists.

Jumping on the IS Bandwagon

At least four splinter groups of the Pakistani Taliban (Jandullah, Tehrik-e-Khilafat, Bajaur and Orakzai region Taliban), one faction of the Afghan Taliban (the Salafi Taliban) and the Uzbek militants of the IMU have

pledged allegiance to IS. The major reservation shown towards the Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda by fighters and commanders of these factions was the underground nature of the two groups' top leadership.[90]

The two major hurdles in the way of jihadists eager to join IS were *bayah* (oath of loyalty to Mullah Umar) and *aqeedah* (faith, as most of Afghan Taliban are Deobandi-Hanafis while IS followers are followers of the Salafi-Takfiri-Jihadist ideology). Within the jihadist community, reneging one's allegiance and changing the faith is considered illegal and an act of rebellion. However, the death of Mullah Umar freed them of their *bayah* to him.[91]

IMU switched sides from the Afghan Taliban to IS because it did not see Mullah Umar in person for a long time. The statement issued by IMU spokesperson before joining IS noted, "Mullah Omar has not been seen for some 13 years, and he can no longer be the leader in accordance with Islamic Sharia." [92] Another case in point is the statement of allegiance to IS by the Bajaur faction of the Pakistan Taliban, issued in April 2015. It noted, "Mullah Omar was limited only to Afghanistan and not for the whole Muslims. He was only our jihadi Ameer [leader] and not a Khalifa (caliph). We do not know where Mullah Omar is. We have not heard that he considers himself as Ameer. No one has ever asked (us) to declare Mullah Omar as our Ameer." [93]

Operationally, questions were raised about the air of secrecy wrapped around the decision-making structures of the Afghan Taliban and its disconnect with mid-level field commanders. The Afghan Taliban's Afghan-centrism was also questioned. The more ambitious younger generation of the jihadists termed the Afghan Taliban as a political group using Islam as a cover to restore their government toppled in Afghanistan by the US invasion in 2001.[94]

Fence-Sitter Groups

A third category consists of opportunistic militants. Rather than siding with Al-Qaeda/Afghan Taliban or IS, these groups have exhibited a 'fence sitting' attitude while monitoring which terror group emerges as the ultimate victor in the struggle for the leadership of the global jihadist movement. A case in point is Pakistani Taliban's splinter group Jamaat-ul-Aharar (JuA).[95] The head of JuA Umar, Khalid Khurasani (real name Abdul Wali), offered IS-central his allegiance, provided he was made the emir of the latter's *Wilayat Khurasan*. [96]

In the broader context of the changing global-militant landscape, this group falls in the category of "swing groups." Hitherto, JuA has kept itself open to invitations or temptations by Al-Qaeda and the IS. More particularly, it has attempted to leverage its position within the broader competition between IS and al-Qaeda. For now, it is likely that JuA will keep its independent identity intact by giving mixed signals to both IS and Al-Qaeda, but not siding with either group completely.[97]

How Widespread and Penetrative is the IS Threat in Afghanistan and Pakistan?

Notwithstanding stiff resistance from the (much larger) Afghan Taliban, the US air and drone strikes, and the Afghan forces' military operations, ISK has been successful in creating space for itself in the Af-Pak militant landscape. The group has shown resilience and regenerative capacity.[98] It has attained enough operational strength, organizational structure, and skills to carry out large-scale scale attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan, in coordination with like-minded militant groups.

Through a series of high-profile attacks in Pakistan's southwestern Balochistan province, in the second half of 2016, ISK has proved its credentials in the Af-Pak jihadist market place. For instance, on 8 August 2016, ISK claimed the suicide bombing of a hospital in Quetta that left as many as 70 people dead and 120 others injured.[99] Similarly, on 24 October, ISK militants targeted a police training academy in Quetta, Balochistan's capital, killing 61 police cadets and wounding 165.[100] A month later, in November, it attacked

a Sufi Shrine (Shah Nurani) in the Khuzdar district of Balochistan, killing 52 devotees and injuring 100 others.[101]

ISK has displayed a similar strength in Afghanistan through a series of high-profile attacks in different parts of the country. For instance, the 13 January 2016 attack on the Pakistani consulate in Jalalabad (7 killed) [102], the 23 July 2016 attack in Kabul, targeting Hazara Shia protesters[103] (80 killed, 230 injured) and the 8 March 2017 assault on the military hospital in Kabul (30 killed, 50 injured) are indication of its outreach and operational strength.[104]

At the same time, IS has found an ideological niche among the radicalized youth of urban areas. Pro-IS allegiances and the spread of IS's online propaganda among the educated youth of middle and upper middle classes are a matter of concern for three reasons. First, it has shaken the existing jihadist landscape, making it more complex, violent, and polarised. Second, while IS has not succeeded in challenging the traditional jihadist groups in the Af-Pak region, the competition has negatively affected regional security. Third, the IS model has provided the new generation of jihadists with an alternative option.

Al-Qaeda's inability to carry out a major terrorist attack within the last several years and the Afghan Taliban's failure to break the stalemate in Afghanistan has left many jihadist groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan disillusioned. To many of them, al-Qaeda's old school and gradualist approach to jihad seems out-dated. In addition, many jihadists see the Afghan Taliban's Afghan-centric focus as a ploy to restore its government in Afghanistan rather than fighting for Islam. The Afghan Taliban is seen as a political rather than an Islamic force.

However, Al-Qaeda is not a spent force in Afghanistan and Pakistan. With the exception of aforementioned defections, the majority of militant groups in the region still support Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan. By announcing its new South Asian branch, the AQIS, Al-Qaeda central has offered a more compelling model of *Ghazwa-e-Hind* to its Af-Pak affiliates. Unlike IS, which has attracted foreign fighters from across the world to fill its ranks in Iraq and Syria, Al-Qaeda prefers working with local fighters on behalf of local issues.

It will be difficult for IS to penetrate the veteran jihadist entities, like the Kashmiri jihadi groups, the Afghan Taliban and their Pakistani counter-parts. However, the splintered and disillusioned fighters and leaders of the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban may gravitate towards IS in future.

Implications of the IS Rise for Afghanistan-Pakistan

A Complex Militant Landscape

The Af-Pak militant landscape has become more complicated, divisive, and a highly contested domain with the emergence of IS.[105] Consequently, it has become unpredictable, diffused and fluid in nature.[106] Operationally, it is Al-Qaeda and Afghan Taliban-led, but ideologically it is an IS-inspired landscape.[107] The IS ingress has also lowered the threshold of violence and influenced online radicalisation in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

IS has the ability to universalise individual grievances of the educated youth of urban areas with its global Salafi-Takfiri-Jihadist narrative, and offers putative solutions in a collective setting. This has allowed the group to transcend the barriers of language, culture and geography.[108] It has given birth to new leaders, cells, symbols, recruitment methods and extremist narratives, adding new layers of complexity to an already overcrowded landscape. The onset of social media has decreased the distance between local and global developments along with accelerating the flow of information.[109]

New militant leaders—like the mastermind of the 2014 attack on the Ismaili Shia community in Karachi, Saad Aziz—escaped the gaze of security surveillance due to their lesser-known militant past. At the same time, the cellular structure of IS's urban affiliates makes their detection and elimination difficult. Moreover, the neutralization of one cell does not affect the working of other cells given their discreet and disconnected nature. This has made counter-terrorism policing and surveillance an uphill task.

After the bulk of foreign troops withdrew from Afghanistan at the end of 2014, the Af-Pak region has become a recruiting pool for IS.[110] Addressing the 10th Global Coalition ministerial meeting on IS in Washington, on 24 March 2017, US Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson noted that IS is stepping up its recruitment of young people from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq. He said, "Today, Daesh (IS) is resorting to many terrorist attacks in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and many other places in Europe in order to send a message that they are still standing and they want for those young people to go fight in its ranks." [111] IS not only offers better remuneration but fighting in Syria and Iraq produces a deeper sense of meaning and significance among those persuaded by the apocalyptic idea.[112]

Widening of the Sunni-Shia Conflict

IS's alliances with the anti-Shia militant organizations, such as JuA, LJA and Jandullah have contributed to an escalation of sectarian violence in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The extreme hatred and penchant to target Shias make IS, Jandullah, LeJ and JUA appealing allies and natural partners.

In addition, IS not only excommunicates the Shias but it also apostatizes the Sunni groups who do not follow its extremist version of Salafi Islam.[113] In this regard, IS is a Sunni supremacist organization. The IS-claimed attacks on the Sufi shrines of Saints Lal Shahbaz Qalandar in Sindh and Shah Nurani in Balochistan clearly show that IS-affiliates in Af-Pak will not limit their sectarian attacks only to Shias. Sufi Muslim practices in Afghanistan and Pakistan seem to be the target of IS attacks as well.

Since 2015, the intensity and frequency of the anti-Shia violence in Afghanistan has risen sharply.[114] The Afghan Taliban, despite being a Sunni militant group, is pan-Islamist, not sectarian. The Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan has remained nationalist and Islamist in nature.

IS's anti-Shia campaign in Afghanistan has forced Iran to enter into a deal with the Afghan Taliban—two erstwhile adversaries—to protect Shia interests in Afghanistan. In return, the Afghan Taliban obtain medical facilities, weapons, and resting places in Iran.[115] It is important to point out that Iran has recruited around 4,000 to 5,000 Shias from Afghanistan and Pakistan to participate in the Syrian civil war.[116] These Shia fighters are trained and financed in Iran and dispatched to Syria to fight under the *Liwa Al-Zainebiyoun* (Brigade of Zaineb, Pakistani)[117] and *Liwa Al-Fatimyoun* (Brigade of Fatima, Afghan) brigades.[118]

In retaliation for the Pakistani Shias' participation in the Syrian civil war, the Sunni terrorist groups have carried out reprisal attacks against the Shia community in Pakistan. For instance, in December 2015, LJA targeted Shia residents of Parachinar (a city in the Kurram tribal region) with a bomb blast, killing 24 Shias. Claiming responsibility for the attack, the spokesperson of LJA, Ali bin Sufyan, said, "This is revenge for the killing of Muslims by the Syrian president and Iran." [119] More recently, JuA has targeted a Shia mosque with a suicide attack in Kurram, killing 23 Shias and injuring 100 others.[120]

In retrospect, media reports indicate that since 2012, several LeJ fighters have travelled to Iraq and Syria to help the Sunni rebels against the Shia regimes of the two countries. In fact, in 2012, LeJ was jointly running the network with the Pakistani Taliban, which sent Sunni Pakistani fighters to Iraq and Syria. A former LeJ commander Usman Ghani, and leader of the Pakistani Taliban Alim Ullah Umray, ran the network.[121]

Threat of Online Radicalization

IS's effective and smart use of the internet and social media for its propaganda campaign and recruitment has taken the threat of online radicalization to a new level. It has revolutionized the recruitment prospects of the would-be jihadists to their favourite militant organizations, thus leaving vulnerable youth segments increasingly susceptible to online radicalization. So, the battlefield has expanded from the real world to the cyber world. Moreover, the threat of cyber radicalization spearheaded by IS is potent and real. Online chat rooms and social media platforms have become the new meeting and recruiting places for jihadist organizations and would-be jihadists.

Since 9/11, Pakistan has shown great vulnerability to online radicalization with increasing Internet penetration in the country. Currently, there are 30 million Internet users in Pakistan and 2.4 million in Afghanistan; half of them use the Internet on their portable electronic devices, including mobile phones. [122] More than 70 percent of these Internet users are youth. Pakistan and Afghanistan should understand that online radicalization is a critical threat, and then devise a collective mechanism to monitor online chat rooms of jihadist organizations, their websites and the profiles of individuals subscribing to their materials.

Conclusion

Defeating IS in Afghanistan is one of the goals of Trump administration's new Afghan policy.[123] Similarly, in December 2016, the declaration of a tripartite meeting in Moscow -comprising Pakistan, China and Russia–pointed out IS as the “main threat” in Afghanistan.[124] This shows that the group has created enough space to feature in the highest-level regional security discussions of the Af-Pak region.

The dilemma facing IS in Afghanistan and Pakistan is that it does not have a towering figure like Ayman Al-Zawahiri to challenge the authority and legitimacy of other major jihadist groups. Though IS has recruited fighters and mid-level commanders from existing militant groups, it has struggled to bring seasoned leaders from these groups to its fold. As a result, ISK is not a major jihadist movement in the region, but only one militant group among a plethora of others.

However, ISK has made two irrefutable gains: alliances have been established with anti-Shia militant groups, and their ideology is resonating among an educated, urban, youthful constituency. The IS partnerships with local sectarian groups have not only encouraged a renewal of these groups but will also sustain IS in the region in the long-term. The security implications of this development are potentially catastrophic, as it will intensify the Sunni-Shia conflict and expand it further.

Meanwhile, the traction of IS propaganda among the educated youth of urban areas, especially in Pakistan, raises new questions about the causal factors and motivations behind their radicalization. IS's smart use of internet and social media has alarmingly increased youth's vulnerability to cyber-radicalization. However, this is not new or surprising. The trend is consistent with the overall radicalization of educated youth with a pro-IS bent in the Middle East, Europe and Central Asia. Nonetheless, an effective response to this radicalization must be sought within the local contexts and extremist milieu of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

This is why military defeat alone will not eliminate the IS threat from the Af-Pak region. Ideological delegitimization of IS's extremist narrative–through counter-ideological responses–will also be needed. It is essential to neutralise the propaganda appeal, while the kinetic response is warranted to destroy IS's ability to carry out large-scale attacks.

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Annex 1: Militant Groups in Afghanistan-Pakistan That Have Pledged Allegiance to IS		
Group Name	Date	Message
Tehrik-e-Khilafat (Pakistan)	July 9, 2014	“From today, Sheikh Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi shall consider Tehrik-e-Khilafat and jihad mujahideen fighters of Pakistan as one of the arrows among his arrows which he has kept for his bow. We are praying from the almighty Allah to give us chance in our lives to see the expansion of Islamic State boundaries toward the Sub-Continent and Khurasan region in order to hoist the flag of Islamic State here...”[125]
Shahidullah Shahid (Pakistan)	Oct 15, 2014	“I am going to announce my allegiance to Al-Baghdadi Al-Qureshi. I will obey his every command, whether good or bad and whatever the situation. Neither the TTP nor its leader Maulana Fazlullah has directed me to announce my allegiance to the ISIS, but I and five senior leaders have decided to join al-Baghdadi al-Qarshi. I want my allegiance to be accepted. I will wait for your reply and at the end all praise must be for Allah Almighty.”[126]
Jandullah (Pakistan)	Nov 18, 2014	“They (Islamic State) are our brothers, whatever plan they have we will support them.”[127]
Al-Tawhid Battalion in Afghanistan-Pakistan	Sept 21, 2014	“Should we keep fighting against the disbelievers and the apostates, or should we refrain from that until you come here? Some of the ignorant ones who left jihad could object to us, as well as some of the people of knowledge, which is that your fight in the land of Khorasan, its advantage and core will apply to some others, and your killed and your martyrs will be contrary to that which Allah has asked from you...”[128]
Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (Pakistan)	Oct 6, 2014	“Hereby, on behalf of all members of our movement, in line with our sacred duties, I declare that we are in the same ranks with the Islamic State (ISIS) in this continued war between Islam and (non-Muslims) Islamic State is free from the patriotic or nationalist agenda...you can see Arabs, Chechens, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Kyrgyz, Russians and many English-speaking Muslim mujahidin in its ranks.”[129]
Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost (Afghanistan)	July 1, 2014	“In Guantanamo in [2002] I saw a vision of a palace with a huge closed door, above which there was a clock pointing to the time of 10 minutes before 12. I was told that was the home of the caliphate. So, I assumed then that the caliphate would be established after 12 years. Coincidentally, the Islamic State declared its caliphate in 2014–or 12 years. Ever since the caliphate fell in 1924 the Islamic ummah has experienced phases of disagreement, division...” failure and disputes and became divided into fighting groups and different small states that fail to represent Islam. All Muslim governments are now null and void as they have been replaced by the caliphate with Baghdadi, the caliph of the Muslims...” and the emir of the believers.”[130]
Bajaur Taliban	April 9, 2015	“Mullah Omar was limited only to Afghanistan and not for the whole Muslims. He was only our jihadi Ameer and not a Khalifa. We do not know where Mullah Omar is. We have not heard that he considers himself as Ameer. No one has ever asked to declare Mullah Omar as our Ameer.” [131]

Annex 2: Profiles of Influential Jihadists and Radical Clerics who have Pledged Allegiance to the Islamic State**1. Hafiz Saeed Khan Orakzai**

Hafiz Saeed Khan Orakzai was a local judge and the former head of the Pakistani Taliban for the Orakzai tribal region. Saeed, 42, left the Pakistani Taliban in October 2014 and pledged allegiance to IS. On January 13, 2015, he replaced the interim head of IS in Afghanistan-Pakistan, Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost who was tasked to organize the group in the region.[132]

Saeed's militant career began after 9/11, when he went to fight against the US forces in Afghanistan in 2001. He hailed from the Mamozai Pashtun tribe of Orakzai agency. He left the Pakistani Taliban with five other commanders, including its former spokesperson, Shahidullah Shahid.

Saeed was considered a close associated of Pakistani Taliban's founding leader Baitullah Mehsud and was with the militant group since its inception in December 2007. He was one of the most hardliner militant commanders in the Pakistani Taliban. He organized a number of terrorist attacks, including the March 2013 attack on the U.S. consulate in Peshawar.[133] He was killed in a US drone strike in Afghanistan's Nangarhar province in August 2016.[134]

2. Mullah Rauf Khadim

Rauf was the deputy head of ISK in Afghanistan and Pakistan. He was killed in a US drone strike on February 9, 2015, in southern Afghanistan's Helmand province.[135] Rauf was a fluent Arabic speaker and swore allegiance to IS on January 26, 2015. He was initially a member of the Afghan Taliban. However, he was demoted after developing differences with the Afghan Taliban for placing restrictions on varying interpretations of the Quran.[136] Another point of contention with the Afghan Taliban arose when Rauf declared allegiance to IS and began recruiting for the organization in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. Rauf along with his followers raised black flags of IS in Helmand and removed white flags of the Taliban.[137]

In 2001, Rauf had been detained by U.S. forces and spent six years in Guantanamo Bay before being released. During his stay in prison, he converted to Takfiri Salfism. He was transferred back to Afghanistan in 2007. [138]

3. Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost

The 50-years old Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost is a veteran Afghan jihadist. He participated in the anti-Soviet jihad (1979-1988) under the banner of Salafi Mujahidin front led by Maulvi Jamil-ur-Rahman in eastern Afghanistan. He hails from Afghanistan's eastern Nangarhar province. On July 1, 2014, he pledged allegiance to IS commander Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi.[139] During the rule of Afghan Taliban in Afghanistan (1996-2001), he did not hold any official position. Throughout that period, he worked with different Saudi-funded aid agencies.

In 2001, he was arrested in Pakistan and handed over to US authorities. For three years, he was kept in Guantanamo Bay. The US released him in April 2005 due to his health problems.[140] However, in 2006, Pakistani security forces detained him but subsequently he was released in 2008 as part of prisoners' exchange between the Taliban and the Pakistani government.

Dost is a prolific writer in Pashtu, Arabic and Dari languages and author of more than a dozen books.[141] He has written on topics as diverse as Islamic theology, politics and poetry. However, his best known work is his Guantanamo memoir published in Pashto language entitled *Matī Zawlanē* (Broken Shackles).[142] Dost parted his ways with ISK after he was not given an influential organizational position.[143]

4. Maulvi Abdul Qahar

Maulvi Abdul Qahar Khurasani is a Salafi-Jihadist ideologue. Khurasani has authored a number books and religious testimonials (available online) about the Salafi-interpretations of jihad. Since 2012, he owns a jihadi media publication house *Abtalul-Islam* (Heroes of Islam). According to his work, all Muslim states working with the West are *murtad* (apostate) and those working with them as legitimate targets.[144] Khurasani is very hostile towards Pakistan. One of his books entitled the *Criterion on Virtues of Fighting Pakistan* justifies militant attacks against Pakistani security forces and government.[145] On July 5, 2014, he took an oath of allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdai in a video published through *Abtalul-Islam*. [146] In the video, a masked man, introduced as Abu Dujana al-Afghani and acting as Khorasani's spokesman, reads the message in eloquent Arabic.[147]

5. Maulana Abdul Aziz

Maulana Abdul Aziz is an influential Pakistani religious cleric, a jihadi ideologue and head of the controversial Red Mosque.[148] In December 2014, a group of female-student from his madrassa, *Jamia Hafsa*, publicly pledged allegiance to IS.[149] Aziz endorsed the video and admitted to his open support for the group.[150]

In 2004, he issued a controversial *fatwa* (religious edict) against the Pakistani army, maintaining that Pakistan army soldiers and personnel of other Pakistani security forces killed during the fight with the militants were not martyr. On the contrary, the militant who died fighting the Pakistani security forces were martyrs.[151]

In 2007, students of the Red Mosque-affiliated seminaries *Jamia Hafsa* and *Jamia Faridia* organized an Islamist uprising against the state.[152] The then army chief and president General Pervez Musharraf crushed the uprising. Aziz spearheaded the uprising with his younger brother Abdul Rashid Ghazi, who was killed during the operation. Aziz was put under house arrest for 21 months on charges of kidnapping, incitement to violence, sedition and terrorism.

6. Shahidullah Shahid

Shahidullah Shahid aka Sheikh Abu Umar Maqbool is the former spokesperson of TTP. On October 6, 2014, he pledged allegiance to IS along with six other commanders of the Pakistani Taliban. In an online video message, he said, "From today, I accept Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as my Caliph and will accept every directive of his and will fight for him whatsoever the situation." [153]

The top leadership of the Pakistani Taliban sacked Shahid from his position and distanced itself from him, terming his allegiance to IS as an individual act rather than organizational. He was appointed as spokesperson of the Pakistani Taliban in 2013. Shahid was among the founding members of TTP. He is also the teacher of slain TTP chiefs Baitullah and Hakimullah Mehsud.[154]

Notes

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