

## **Emergence of the Islamic State and Challenges for Af-Pak Region**

**Sohail Ahmad and Mahwish Bakht**

### **Abstract**

The Islamic State was hoping for a smooth establishment and extraordinary gains in the Khorasan region. The presence of US forces in Afghanistan and Operation Zarb-e-Azb by the strong military of Pakistan did not allow it to happen. The Taliban could be a strong ally of IS in the region but clashes between the two had diminished the chances of its establishment and success in the Khorasan region. Both organizations have declared 'Jihad' against each other to enjoy monopoly status in the region, especially in Afghanistan. Afghan government even supported Taliban to fight against IS. Though IS has claimed many deadly attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan it has not gained the momentum and support it was expecting. The nature of this study is qualitative.

**Keywords:** Afghanistan, Pakistan, Islamic State, Khorasan, Challenges

### **Introduction**

Afghanistan has long history of wars and conflicts. After the withdrawal of Soviet troops, civil war started in the country, later 9/11 happened which struck the entire world with absolute surprise. Resultantly, Afghanistan, became a battleground again between the powerful United States of America and its allies against Al-Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban and other insurgent groups present in the poor war torn country.

The Pakistani military has been launching various military operations against terrorists to stop their cross-border movement from Afghanistan to Pakistan and vice versa. The alliance formation of Pakistan with US in war on terror in Afghanistan resulted in the start of a longest insurgency since its establishment. In a very short time, the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) had captured large swaths of territory in Iraq and Syria. Despite the resistance shown from international community, ISIL is still capable of carrying out serious terrorist attacks in the USA and Europe. ISIL has declared the Pak-Afghan Khorasan region as part of their territory and it seeks to establish a province here (Al Jazeera, 2017).

ISIL had confidence in its strategies and power because of what it had achieved in Iraq and Syria. Keeping in view the power and gains of ISIL, and the kind of conflicts present in Pakistan and Afghanistan, it will be an interesting struggle. This study aims to analyze the emergence of the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK) through the sociological lens of contagion theory.

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The roots of the ISIL can be traced back to Al-Qaeda in Iraq. Its relationship with the Khorasan province began when nine members of Al-Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan paid their allegiance to ISIL leader Abu Bakar Al-Baghdadi in March 2014. For these militant organizations, the main source for spreading their message is propaganda through speeches, radio programs, wall chalking, and pamphlet distribution. For manipulating Afghan refugees residing in Shamsato and Khorasan a booklet titled 'Fatah' was distributed in support of ISIL in Oct, 2014 (Mir, 2016).

On 25th January 2015, in an ISIL audio message, spokesperson Abu Muhammad Al-Adnani announced the establishment of ISK. This announcement made it clear and obvious that ISIL would increase its power in Khorasan. Khorasan province includes Pakistan, Afghanistan, India and some parts of Central Asia and other nearby countries (Al Jazeera, 2017).

### **Establishment of Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan**

The US Army General John F. Campbell in February 2015, had recognized the presence of IS in Afghanistan as a major threat for Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and ISAF. Clashes between Taliban, their supporters and IS fighters started in February in the eastern province of Nangarhar as it is a strategically important province for IS that has a border with Pakistan. Initially, people are attracted to ISK not only because of ideological reasons, but also for monetary reasons; IS fighters are receiving more money than Taliban fighters. Islamic State pays its fighters from 400\$ to 500\$ per month (Ningthoujam, 2017). Their growing influence is alarming for Afghanistan as Afghan president Ashraf Ghani called ISK a terrible threat for South Asia. However, the death of Mullah Muhammad Omar and appointment of new Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansur had brought great opportunity for ISK to recruit more fighters from Taliban circles (Ahmed & Harooni, 2016).

According to the Royal United Service Institute, the total strength of ISK is 7000 to 8500 in Afghanistan. It includes fighters as well as their supporters. Moreover, ISK has sympathizers in almost 25 provinces of Afghanistan, in addition, nearly 10% of Taliban fighters are sympathizers of ISIL (Homeland Security Committee, 2015).

Meanwhile, ISK is also anchoring its roots in Pakistan as evidences have shown their hold and recurrence of their terrorist activities in a country for example Hafiz Umar, a prominent leader of ISIL, was arrested by Pakistani security forces in Lahore. He was believed to be the mastermind of the Safoora Goth attack, and was working in Lahore to recruit more fighters to carry out more attacks in Pakistan. Security forces also arrested a private university professor from Lahore who had connections to Daesh. In

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January 2015, Pakistani security forces captured Yusuf Al-Salafi from Lahore, a leader of IS in Pakistan (Haider, 2015).

It shows that ISIL did not try to capture territory in Pakistan; instead it focused on creating cells in large cities and carrying out attacks from these locations. It also tried to establish contacts with local militant organizations with the aim of providing breathing space for ISIL in the country.

### **Challenges faced by ISK in Afghanistan**

Afghanistan is a very complex country. It has been facing violence and militancy for more than 30 years. The major threat for Afghanistan is the presence ISK. To counter the establishment of ISK and its growing influence in the region is a big challenge for Afghanistan. Mostly, ISK has been facing opposition on different fronts; the Ashraf Ghani government strict policies against ISK, Obama administration's new policies for combating IS hold and U.S. and NATO air strikes against ISK, protecting massive killings of IS commanders and fighter forces from the attacks of ANSF and foreign forces such as ISAF, influence of other organizations such as Hizbe-Islami of Gulbadin HikmatYar, IMU, and other small organizations and tribal and ethnic rivalries. Regional countries like Iran, Pakistan, India and China, also have vested interests in the internal and external matters of Afghanistan. This may provide hindrance in the growth of ISK. But the current fragmented situation of country not only provides fertile grounds but also acts as a stumbling block for new organizations like ISIL to establish and govern their organization.

Though initially ISK managed to recruit many fighters from Afghanistan, when it applied its trademarked brutal tactics (used in Iraq and Syria) they were rejected by the Afghan nation (Dawn.com, 2016). When IS started blowing up prisoners with explosive and raping local women, it turned local people in Nangarhar against the organization. Its increased influence in different provinces and districts of Afghanistan has been declined (DAWN, 2017).

Throughout 2015, small-scale attacks were witnessed on ISK by the country's security forces, but the most important battle was fought between the Taliban and fighters of ISK. Regional countries like Iran have supported the Taliban against ISK. Russia has also been accused of sharing intelligence with the Afghan Taliban to counter ISK (Shalizi & Smith, 2016). The most intense battles have taken place in Nangarhar, Helmand, Zabul and Farah provinces. At the end of 2015, it seemed that ISK had been largely defeated in the south and west of the country, but it still maintained a strong presence in the East of Afghanistan (Azami, 2015).

### **Challenges Faced by ISK in Pakistan**

When IS established its Khorasan province, Operation Zarb-e-Azb was taking place in Pakistan. In a country where terrorist attacks have decreased by 48 percent in 2015, IS is trying to establish its base (The News, 2015). Pakistani Chief of Army staff, said that even the shadow of ISIL would not be allowed in Pakistan as the country had a policy of zero-tolerance against ISIL (AFP, 2015).

IS has adopted a different strategy in Pakistan. It has tried to make contacts with local militant organizations like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, TTP. It has also tried to create sleeper cells in big cities instead of capturing territories. TTP is a strong enough, for ISIL to believe, to help it in establishing its network in Pakistan. However, TTP has also been hard hit by Operation Zarb-e-

Azb. North Waziristan Agency, which was the base of TTP, is in the government's control now.

Many terrorists affiliated with TTP have been killed or arrested in Operation Zarb-e-Azb (Ashfaq, 2016). Moreover, the IS expected to get support from Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. However, until June 2016, the security forces arrested more than 600 militants that had affiliation with Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. What is happening is that instead of supporting new organization like ISK, LeJ is worried about its own survival in Pakistan (Gishkori, 2016). ISK was on weak grounds without the support of Jamat-ul-Ahrar that had joined TTP once again (Houreld & Mehsud, 2015). Therefore, ISK was not only struggling for its networking in Pakistan but also involved in terrorist attacks like Safoora Goth attack and attack on Quetta Hospital in Aug, 2016 (Moore, 2016).

### **Findings**

- ISK had adopted different means to promote its agenda in Khorasan region, such include booklets, pamphlets, wall chalking and speeches on radio programs.
- Both U.S. and Ghani government have declared ISK as a serious threat for South Asian region.
- Afghan people attracted towards IS were not on ideological basis but for economic incentives because they receive 400 \$ to 500 \$ as IS fighter that is more than Taliban fighters.
- While in Afghanistan, IS is facing numerous challenges on domestic, regional and international levels.

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- IS has also faced failure in establishment in Afghanistan as different states are supporting Taliban against ISK.
- To generate revenue, ISK will try to take control of drug trade that produces huge amounts of money in Afghanistan.
- IS has also established sleeper cells in big cities of Pakistan to maintain their terrorist networks.
- By building collaboration with TTP or other militant groups in Pakistan, IS was hoping to successfully carry out terrorist activities on Pakistani soil. However, military operations carried out in Pakistan had broken down TTP networks and meanwhile narrowed down space for IS existence in Pakistan.
- Strong reaction shown by Pakistan military against TTP and ISK by launching military operations in FATA and big cities is one of the main reasons of weak hold of ISK in Pakistan.

### **Conclusion**

If we analyze the establishment of ISK in Afghanistan, they are struggling to make their permanent base. They were strongly hit by the Taliban and the Afghan forces with aerial support from the US. ISK is only present in a few districts in Eastern parts of Afghanistan. It's really hard for ISK to establish its rule in Khorasan region because of the strong military response from foreign forces and strict policies of American Administrations. Although, evidences have proved that either on short term basis of alliance formation with the local militant groups and Taliban defections, ISK is involved in serious terrorist attacks carried out in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Therefore, IS had faced a lot of challenges in Afghanistan and Pakistan for gaining complete control but has taken advantage of their tense bilateral relations.

### **Suggestions**

- ISK is on the decline in Afghanistan and Pakistan but neither completely crushed in Afghanistan nor in Pakistan.
- If the Afghan government wants to defeat IS in Afghanistan, it must maintain the same pressure that is being applied against ISK fighters from the Pakistani military.
- Operations against IS should be continuously carried out until the last fighter on Afghan soil is eliminated.
- The Afghan government should also stop funding of ISK as many people are joining ISK because of financial reasons.
- The government of Pakistan should also keep a close check on ISK links with local militant organizations.

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- Both governments should also show the local population the brutality of IS carried out in Iraq and Syria as an approach to turn locals against ISK.
- The government of Pakistan should introduce strict border management policies that control the cross-border movement of militants including both TTP members and ISK.
- More search operations should be carried out by security forces in Pakistan to devastate the sleeper cells of extremist organizations in big cities and avoid further loss of lives and infrastructure in the country.
- Pakistan should also keep the complete records of refugees and migrants coming from other states in order to combat terrorist activities inside the state.
- To keep ISK uninfluenced in Pakistan, it is necessary to maintain peace inside the state and control all sectarian and ethnic rivalries.

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