

The impact of the Islamic State on Pakistan

By Muhammad Amir Rana

■ Executive summary

The growing influence of the terrorist group known as the Islamic State (IS) is a worrisome prospect for Pakistan. It appears that the militant landscape of the country will become more complex and threatening after the emergence of the Baghdadi-led IS in Iraq and Syria. Because Pakistani militants do not operate in isolation, it is natural for them to draw inspiration from the IS. As militant groups prepare to enter into another phase of ideologically and operationally transformed jihadist discourse, the implications for Pakistan's internal security are severe. Apart from security implications, this process will affect extremism discourse in the country and the behaviour of non-violent religious organisations.

The Islamic State's footprints in Pakistan

The Islamic State (IS) is a real and emerging threat facing Pakistan, and its influence is increasing inside the country. Pamphlets praising the group were seen in Peshawar and Pak-Afghan border areas in mid-2014. Reports of graffiti supporting the IS are coming from across the country, including Rawalpindi, Lahore (Shah, 2014), Karachi, Peshawar and Bannu. Police have confiscated IS flags that were fixed to electricity poles in Taxila (Asghar, 2014), a city 35 km from the federal capital, Islamabad.

The Balochistan government reports a growing IS footprint in the province (*Dawn*, 2014) and confirmation by the banned terrorist group Jundullah that an IS delegation recently visited the province to unite various militant groups are major indications of IS interest in Pakistan. A recent media report that the IS has recruited more than 12,000 people from Hanguin Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the Kurram agency of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (*Pakistan Today*, 2014) – two hotspots of Sunni-Shia sectarian conflict – apparently contradicts Federal Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan's statement that the IS is not present in the country (*The Nation*, 2014).

Despite these reports there is insignificant evidence to suggest that the IS is present in Pakistan. It is not known yet who is behind the graffiti referred to above – possibly political parties who may want to exploit the situation or are inspired by the IS; or sympathiser groups and individuals who may or may not have direct links with the IS. It is possible that the Thereek-e-Khilafat movement¹ in Karachi and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) commanders who have taken an oath of allegiance to Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi are behind some of the graffiti. The ideological association and operational linkage between Pakistani militants and the IS are not new. The Balochistan chapter of the violent Sunni sectarian group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ)² has been part of the IS since the latter's inception: the LeJ militants who went to Syria to fight against Bashar al-Assad's forces joined the IS. LeJ militants set up the Ghazi Abdul Rasheed³ training camp in the Iraqi city of Erbil in 2013 and the militants that trained in the camp eventually constituted the Ghazi Force (Rana, 2014). Similarly, the banned terrorist group Jundullah's claim that an IS delegation visited Balochistan can also be seen from this perspective. However, it is not clear if the IS delegation comprised LeJ members from Balochistan who had earlier joined the IS

1 A TTP-affiliated group in Karachi that has claimed responsibility for attacks on police and rangers in Karachi. The group came into existence in 2012. Abu Jandal Khurasani is the so-called spokesperson who claims that the group is aiming to take back Muslim territories from the control of the "local puppets of imperialist forces" and to establish a caliphate in Pakistan.

2 A violent Sunni sectarian group that is reportedly involved in the killing of Shias, including Hazaras in Balochistan. Factions of the group are believed to be associated with al-Qa'ida and the TTP.

3 Militants named the camp after Rasheed Ghazi, who was a Sunni cleric killed during the siege of the Red Mosque in Islamabad in 2007.

and went to Syria or Iraq. Among the probable objectives of the reported visit of the IS delegation to Balochistan, i.e. to recruit new members for the group, to seek support from Pakistan-based militant groups or to set up the IS chapter in Pakistan, the objective of obtaining new recruits appears prime and relevant because the IS needs more human resources to retain control of the areas it has occupied in Iraq and Syria. The IS would also be interested in developing relationships with the militant organisations that are active in the Iranian part of Balochistan.

Apart from reports of the IS's physical presence in Pakistan, the IS's influence has triggered transformations among many religious groups in Pakistan, affecting both violent and non-violent religious organisations in the country.

The IS as an ideological catalyst

New influences and sources of inspiration can be expected to cause attempts at ideological "purification" among religious organisations. These and other transformations among terrorist groups usually entail a process of abrasion, which sometime goes deep, but should not be regarded as undermining the groups that undergo the process. Transformations do not make terrorist groups weaker; rather, they provide them with new ideological strength that helps them to restructure themselves and revamp their operational strategies. When a breakaway faction of the TTP, Jamatul Ahrar, claimed that the TTP now belonged to it, it was in effect stating that it had replaced older organisational and operational formations with new ones. This phenomenon is not unique to the TTP: Pakistani terrorist movements have passed through many transformations during the last decade. For example, the terrorist attacks in the U.S. on September 11th 2001 increased al-Qa'ida's influence among Kashmir-based militant and sectarian groups in Pakistan, transforming major segments of them (Rana, 2014).

Similar ideological transformations were behind the confrontation between Taliban commanders Abdullah Mehsud and Baitullah Mehsud in 2004. Abdullah wanted to speed up terrorist operations in Afghanistan, but Baitullah had embraced new ideological approaches. While the latter did not object to the Pakistani Taliban helping its Afghan counterparts in Afghanistan, he stressed the establishment of the rule of sharia law in the Pakistani tribal areas that were under Taliban control (Rana et al., 2010: 74). Under the influence of the Arabs and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan Baitullah also disagreed with Waziri militant commanders who wanted to focus on Afghanistan rather than carrying out attacks inside Pakistan. In subsequent years differences between Hakimullah Mehsud and Waliur

Rehman Mehsud were primarily of an operational nature, but the latter was not happy with the increasing sectarian tendencies in the TTP.⁴

When ideological transformations occurred across Pakistani militant groups within the broader framework of an Islamic state or caliphate, it gradually "purified" their objectives and caused the development of various trends among them. Currently Pakistani militant groups have widely diverse interests ranging from tribal and nationalist ambitions to sectarian, regional and even global ones.

Impact on religious discourse

The ideology of establishing an Islamic state or caliphate espoused by various Islamist terrorist groups is not new to Pakistan: most violent and many non-violent Islamist groups in Pakistan believe in it, and even reject what religious leaders, scholars and religious-political parties such as Jamaat-e-Islami and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam have achieved thus far in Pakistan, e.g. in terms of the Islamisation of Pakistan's constitution and society. The country presents a unique and complex case of religious activism that cannot be compared with that in any other Muslim country. Multiple religious organisations are operating in the country with different objectives and with a mixed bag of successes and failures.

The rise and success of the IS could play a very dangerous, inspirational role in Pakistan, where more than 200 religious organisations are operating at the national and regional levels. These organisations pursue multiple agendas such as the transformation of society according to their ideologies, the enforcement of sharia law, the establishment of a caliphate, and the fulfilment of their sectarian objectives through militancy. They could be influenced by the IS's success in various ways. A few would limit themselves to providing just moral support, but others might actively provide donations and financial assistance to the IS. Still others – mainly religious extremist and militant organisations – could find inspiration in IS strategies and tactics. This is perfectly possible, since even groups operating in two different regions can find common ground in the *takfiri* ideologies⁵ they believe in and in the organisational links they share.

Pakistan's religious-political parties claim that they are the custodians of the larger religious discourse and tradition in the country. However, in the last two decades another form of religious organisation has also emerged. These types of organisations are categorised as revivalist in their nature and serve as agents of Islamisation and religio-socialisation, but believe that change is impossible within the parameters of the constitution and with the current

4 Hakeemullah took charge as TTP head after Baitullah Mehsud's death in a drone attack in August 2009. Waliur Rehman Mehsud was TTP's religious affairs committee head and differed with Hakeemullah over operational strategies. Both Rehman and Hakeemullah were killed in separate drone strikes in May and November 2013, respectively.

5 *Takfir* is the practice of one Muslim declaring some other Muslim individual(s), religious sects, systems of government or rulers disbelievers or *kafir* and regarding them as being outside the creed of Islam (*millat-e-Islam*). *Takfiri* groups believe that armed rebellion, or *khurooj*, against the "transgressing and disbelieving" state and its rulers is justified according to Islam's legal rulings.

political dispensation. They deem democracy and the democratic process to be inadequate for the type of change that they advocate. Some of them see democracy as contrary to Islamic principles of governance and want to replace it with their own version of the sharia. Others, such as Tanzeemul Ikhwan⁶ and Tanzeem-i-Islami,⁷ believe that the sharia cannot be introduced in its entirety through the democratic electoral process and consider the use of force to achieve power as an alternative. These organisations have sectarian and militant tendencies and their dominant approach is characterised by their quest for a complete change in the system. This is contrary to the approach of the religious-political parties such as Jamaat-e-Islami and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, which focus on gradual change within the system.

Many extremist groups in Pakistan believe that change is possible only through armed revolt against the state and its defence apparatus, and do not believe in a non-violent struggle to bring about change. TTP, LeJ and smaller groups like the Tehreek-i-Khilafat fall into this category. The appeal of their message increases when Islamists succeed elsewhere in the world. This builds pressure on the leaders of non-violent Islamic movements and political parties, because their followers and cadres start comparing the achievements of their leadership with that of Islamist movements that are succeeding elsewhere. Achieving a goal quickly always attracts ideological movements and spurs extremists to adopt violent ways. If the IS sustains its momentum and succeeds in maintaining control over the territories it has captured it can cause frustration among groups such as Hizbut Tahrir⁸ and the student wings of religious-political parties in Pakistan that believe in non-violent struggle for the establishment of a caliphate.

The IS's impact on the militant landscape

Surprisingly, an announcement of allegiance to the IS came from five Taliban commanders who constituted the operational core of the TTP. Many were expecting the Jamatul Ahrar, a breakaway faction of the TTP that was strongly influenced by the IS but not formally allied to it, to be the first to take an oath of allegiance to the IS. But it seems that the group is wavering between the Afghan Taliban-al-Qa'ida alliance and the IS as its future association. By declaring allegiance to the IS, the Taliban commanders not only took the lead, but also captured the title of Khorasan. Previously, leaders of Jamatul Ahrar tried to tag themselves as Khorasani, claiming they were the first troops of the prophesied Islamic state of Khorasan. They believe the time has come for the establishment of an Islamic state in this region comprising some parts of Central Asia, and Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan. However, it would be very

difficult for Jamatul Ahrar to maintain relations with al-Qa'ida and the IS at the same time, while also remaining loyal to the Afghan Taliban's Mullah Omar. The five defecting TTP commanders have strong sectarian credentials and seem to be inspired by the IS's sectarian designs. Their likely future behaviour is unclear because the IS has asked its followers to channel their resources to Syria and Iraq, where the group first wants to consolidate its position.

On the other hand, the IS's influence on militant groups in Pakistan and Afghanistan is a huge challenge for al-Qa'ida. The groups that were not happy with al-Qa'ida's operational strategies are now more attracted to the IS. Their frustration with al-Qa'ida was mainly due to the conviction that their ultimate objective of establishing an Islamic state and system could not be achieved only through terrorist attacks. The IS model showed them the importance of controlling territory in order to project and establish power on the ground. This was perhaps the main reason behind the establishment of al-Qa'ida in South Asia. The growing realisation that operating through affiliates may not work in the future forced al-Qa'ida to set up a separate branch in South Asia that may help it to recruit members directly instead of relying on local associates.

The IS will also affect the Afghan Taliban. IS militants reject nationalism and consider the Afghan Taliban as part of the religious-nationalist movement. Members of the Afghan Taliban who have weak nationalist tendencies and are more inclined towards a "purified" ideological goal could initiate such a debate in the group's ranks. While defections cannot be ruled out, it is unclear how the IS will impact the Afghan Taliban movement, particularly when Mullah Omar wants to establish an Islamic emirate in Afghanistan, while al-Baghdadi wants to extend his Islamic state to the whole world.

The most important question relates to the future of the TTP. There is no doubt that the IS's impact has worsened the TTP's internal crisis. While the group was already experiencing an internal crisis over the issue of leadership, the Pakistani military operation known as Zarb-i-Azb (Sharp Strike)¹⁰ in North Waziristan has further weakened its organisational structure. But we cannot predict the collapse of the TTP. The IS factor has provided new life to the group. The movement is undergoing an extensive transformation, but it has the potential to re-emerge as a stronger ideological militant movement, possibly under a different name.

However, at critical stages names, tags and affiliations do not matter in militant movements. It is a four-pronged form of strength that matters, including ideological and political vision, operational capacity, effective propaganda, and

⁶ Headed by Maulana Akram Awan, the group was formed in 1986 and it has influence in parts of North Punjab.

⁷ Founded by a former Jamaat-e-Islami leader Dr Israr Ahmed in 1972 in Lahore, this group aims to establish a caliphate in Pakistan.

⁸ Hizbut Tahrir is an international Islamist group that is working for the revival of the caliphate in the Muslim world. The group was outlawed in Pakistan on November 16th 2003.

⁹ *Azb* was the name of one of the swords used by the Prophet Muhammad, while *zarb* when used as a noun means a strike or blow. *Zarb-i-Azb* thus literally means a strike of the Prophet's sword.

a support base in society. It seems that the TTP has not yet lost any of these characteristics.

As cited earlier, the Jamatul Ahrar (JuA) is largely inspired by the IS's successes. Even if it completely breaks its links with the TTP and al-Qa'ida, the JuA will remain ideologically and politically strong. As far as its operational capabilities are concerned, the new group has a strong nexus with sectarian terrorist networks and factions of the Punjabi Taliban and the various Jundallah groups in Pakistan.

The phenomenon of Jundallah is important in this perspective. Many groups are operating under the name of Jundallah in Pakistan, similar to the Punjabi Taliban groups. While the Punjabi Taliban emerged from the Deobandi and Salafist militant groups, Jundallah groups are mainly breakaway factions of the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) and its subsidiary student and militant wings. With the exception of the Jundallah in Iranian Balochistan, the remaining identically named groups that are active in Karachi and the Peshawar Valley are of a similar nature. With their Islamist background, they are naturally inclined towards the IS, and like a few commanders of the Hizb-i-Islami – a JI affiliate in Afghanistan – apparently intend to announce their allegiance to the IS.

Seen from this perspective, the JuA is likely to have a close operational alliance with Jundallah groups inside Pakistan. Conversely, the TTP's operational concentration will increase inside Afghanistan. It appears as if a new formation or alliance of al-Qa'ida, the Afghan Taliban, TTP, the local Taliban led by Gul Bahadur and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan will emerge that will be challenged by an alliance of JuA and its Pakistani affiliates and breakaway factions of the Afghan Taliban and Hizb-i-Islami.

Implications for internal security

In the short term IS-inspired small groups and commanders could launch sectarian attacks in Pakistan. In this context the Balochistan government assessment report on

the IS's presence in the province is significant.¹⁰ The report claims that the IS has offered to join hands with some elements of LeJ and Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat¹¹ in Pakistan. At the same time the TTP commanders who have declared allegiance to the IS have strong sectarian credentials and some of them belong to the sectarian flashpoints of Hangu, Orakzai and Kurram agencies. Perpetrating sectarian violence will be an easier way for them to prove their loyalty to the IS. In this context the coming months will be sensitive, and security institutions will have to be extra vigilant to prevent the threat of sectarian unrest in the country.

As far as the security implications for the border region between Pakistan and Afghanistan are concerned, the IS has created a major survival challenge for the main militant actors in the area, who could now attempt to prove their operational credentials. Specifically al-Qa'ida and the TTP led by Fazlullah are facing immense pressure. They could launch attacks to prove that they are still strong and relevant, and could lead entire militant movements in the region. At the same time IS-inspired groups could launch operations in the IS style and try to capture towns and cities in the border regions of Afghanistan. But such attempts in Pakistan have less chance of success, because the Pakistani military has gained control of most ungoverned territories in the tribal region.

In a wider context, Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi's statement of November 2014, which he issued after an attack on his hideout in which he was injured, is significant (Kirkpatrick & Gladstone, 2014). He ordered terrorists groups across the world to target the West and its allied Muslim rulers and forces. At the same time the reports of reconciliation between al-Qa'ida and the IS are significant (Joscelyn, 2014). Although al-Qa'ida and other terrorist groups are facing internal crises and the Pakistani military operation in North Waziristan has scattered their infrastructure, conciliation processes will increase the chances of bringing the divided groups back into the fold. From an internal Pakistani and regional security perspective, this would not be good news.

¹⁰ The report was not made public, but some media carried highlights. An example can be seen at <<http://www.dawn.com/news/1143133>>.

¹¹ This is a new name for the banned Sunni sectarian group Sipah-e-Sahabah Pakistan, which was adopted to avoid the restrictions placed on it by the government after it was banned.

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