



Center for the analysis of terrorism

Pakistani Jihadis and Global Jihad

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1. The Deep Ties between Pakistani Armed Groups and the International Jihadi Milieu

Emerging in the 1980s when thousands of Pakistani volunteers, mostly students from religious seminaries, migrated to Afghanistan to join the anti-Soviet jihad, the Pakistani jihadi landscape was divided between a myriad of groups whose “growth, if not actually sponsored, had certainly been looked upon with favour by the state”, as noted by Pakistani journalist Zahid Hussain. Very early on, a number of these groups came to nurture links to Afghan-Arab circles. Among them were Lashkar-e-Taiba (LET)-, Harakat-ul-Mujahidin (HUM) and Harakat-al-Jihad-al-Islami (HJI), the last two having eventually merged into Harakat ul-Ansar (HUA).

The leader of LET Hafiz Saeed, for example, participated in the war in Afghanistan in the early 1980s and frequented Abdallah Azzam, the “godfather of global jihad” and leader of the Services Bureau, and Usama bin Ladin. In an interview with Zahid Hussain, Saeed praised their “dedication to jihad” and described Bin Ladin as “a man of extraordinary qualities”. Besides, Azzam provided his support to Saeed in founding Markaz al-Da’wa wal-Irshad (MDI), LET’s parent organization, in 1986. Thanks to its connections notably in Saudi Arabia and its close relationship with Pakistan’s intelligence Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), MDI participated in facilitating the influx of Arab volunteers and accommodating them in Pakistan. As a result, according to Stephen Tankel, “there were significant personnel overlaps between [MDI and the Services Bureau]”.

These relationships between Pakistani militant outfits and Arab-Afghan were solidified by the training nexus in and around the province of Khost, eastern Afghanistan, especially following the Soviet withdrawal of the country in 1989. While Arab groups focused on training to overthrow local regimes or wage jihad on another open front, Pakistani jihadis in the province were focused on training for fighting in Kashmir. In mid-May of 1989, the Arab Afghan Mustafa Hamid recorded that during his travels through Khost, he came to find “a large group of Pakistani mujahidin encamped there, from two different organizations”, namely HJI and HUM, which

mainly operated in the region. It is thus not a surprise to find that these two groups fought the same battles as al-Qa'ida, as Bin Ladin's organization was also headquartered in the area. In the early 1990s, it was reported that ISI-supported Kashmiri militant groups trained along with "Filipinos, Bosnian Muslims, Uighurs from Xinjiang" in several camps at Zhawara Valley in Khost.

Once most of the foreign fighters left the Afghan-Pakistani region, one of the few remaining forces still training in Khost were the Kashmir-oriented groups, such as HUA, which operated closely to others like al-Qa'ida. In fact, Pakistani jihadis even "trained secretly", according to Mustafa Hamid, at Jihadwal, al-Qa'ida's main training camp in Khost. "After a few days, they divided and claimed takfir against each other and even against al-Qa'ida. Abu Atta who was the amir of al-Qa'ida in Khost dismissed all of them", the Egyptian recalled. He further said that, after the few remaining members of al-Qa'ida in Khost left to Sudan, "some Pakistanis came to train in Jihadwal, but they came with their own instructors and really only just used the space at Jihadwal".

The training and frontlines nexus between Pakistani jihadi groups and the rest of the foreign militant diaspora remained once the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan in 1996. The Afghan sanctuary was even more key to these groups as many of them had members who were wanted in Pakistan, which then put pressure on the Taliban for their extradition. Media reports contended that in 1997, the various camps established in Khost hosted numerous Pakistani fugitives, wanted for "international terrorism incidents, political assassinations, and sectarian murders". U.S. military response to the East Africa bombings in August 1998 further underlined the closeness between these Kashmiri groups and their Arab allies, including al-Qa'ida, when cruise missiles struck the camps in Zahawara which hit not only Bin Ladin's men but also killed several members of HUA. Fadhil Harun also recalled that after the hijacking of an Indian Airlines flight which led to the release of, among others, Masood Azhar (the future leader of Jaish-e-Mohammed) in December 1999, he and the rest of an al-Qa'ida delegation went to visit Ilyas Kashmiri in his camp to follow the news. Taliban leaders, Pakistani jihadis, including Azhar, and al-Qa'ida then celebrated what they saw as a successful outcome. "We discovered Mullah Masood

Azhar and Sheikh Osama knew each other from before”, according to Abu Jandal, Bin Ladin’s former bodyguard.

Also, both parties were involved in defending the “Islamic emirate” against the Northern Alliance in and around Kabul. Nevertheless, it should be noted that these relations were not without issues. In an internal al-Qa’ida document written in November 1997, Abd al-Hadi al-Iraqi, who led al-Qa’ida’s fighting efforts in Kabul, envisaged a relocation of the Arab fighters from Murad Beg to Bagram, saying that if they and HJI were to join forces, they could constitute “an appropriate sized group (its number is expected to be around 20 brothers)”. While he deplored the issues in the cooperation with HUA, which shared responsibility for the frontline in Murad Beg, he later said that “there has now been a little improvement in the Harakat ul-Ansar situation; we have reached some level of understanding”.

The Pakistani jihadi groups-al-Qa’ida nexus was also political. In February 1998, Bin Ladin announced the formation of the “World Islamic Front for jihad against the Jews and the Crusaders”, which declared the blood of any U.S. citizens, including the civilians, “legal”. But as opposed to his 1996 statement urging the U.S. to withdraw from the Arabian Peninsula, Bin Ladin was not alone, as he had previously reached out to numerous fellow jihadi leaders in Afghanistan and Pakistan so that they sign the document. Among the signatories was Fazlur Rahman Khalil, the leader of HUA. Further, when Bin Ladin held a press conference at al-Qa’ida’s al-Siddiq camp in Khost’s Zhawara Valley to announce the formation of the Front, the journalists he invited to attend the event were escorted from North Waziristan to Khost by members of HUA.

During their stay in Taliban’s Afghanistan, Bin Ladin and al-Qa’ida also relied on a network of Pakistani ulemas to provide them with religious legitimacy to their anti-U.S. jihad. During his vocal media campaign against the U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia, Bin Ladin sought and obtained the support of a number of these scholars, as recalled by Abu Jandal, who stated that the 1998 fatwa of the Saudi was “supported by many scholars inside Afghanistan and Pakistan”.

Similarly, Fadhil Harun, a late figure of al-Qa'ida in East Africa, maintained in his memoirs that, in late 1998, Bin Ladin "met with ulama from Sindh, India and Afghanistan to issue the famous fatwa about the infidel forces in the Arabian Peninsula, and they issued fatwas stating that [the presence of U.S. forces in Saudi Arabia] was forbidden." According to Harun, these communications between al-Qa'ida and Pakistani ulemas were facilitated by the organization's representative in Pakistan, Abu Yasir al-Jaza'iri, who "knows all the Shaykh's secret connections in Pakistan, whether in the government, media or among the ulemas".

Besides "ulema from Baluchistan", the most key religious figure in Pakistan supporting Bin Ladin's agenda was Mufti Nizamuddin Shamzai, the director of Binori town in Karachi, a key breeding ground for the Taliban movement. After he expressed his support to the 1998 fatwa, Bin Ladin reportedly sent him a letter praising him for "supporting the Islamic right to confront the Crusaders and Jews". As explained by Anne Stenersen, "Shamzai's support was crucial as it gave Bin Ladin's political statements a veneer of religious legitimacy among the Deobandi networks in Afghanistan and Pakistan". Indeed, Shamzai was then one of the most respected religious figures within the Pakistani militant milieu, including for groups such as HUM. After 9/11, he and his circle would continue to actively support the Taliban and al-Qa'ida.

These personal relationships with Pakistan's religious establishment enabled Bin Ladin to leverage his own standing in Afghanistan, as tensions existed between him and the Taliban leader Mullah Umar. This is where these radical ulemas intervened and helped mediate this stormy relation. Mustafa Hamid, a close friend of both men, recalled that "relations between Mullah Omar and Abu Abdullah were still not good. Mullah Omar had consulted some Pakistani ulama for advice on how to repair the relationship. They suggested Mullah Omar visit Abu Abdullah and talk to him. They also suggested Mullah Omar marry a daughter of Abu Abdullah's because then the Arabs and Afghans would become like a big family and things would be smoothed down. This was traditional thinking in the region, and the Pakistani ulama thought it would work with the Arabs." In another episode illustrating the mediating role played by these religious scholars, it was reported that in early 1999, as the tensions between Mullah Umar and Bin Ladin were high, Shamzai intervened and "called for

an immediate intervention of the ulama in order to end the dispute [between the two]”.

2. In the aftermath of 9/11

After it fled Afghanistan in late 2001, al-Qa'ida managed to survive and hide in neighboring Pakistan thanks to its longstanding ties to various Pakistani groups. Mustafa Hamid's account stated that following the fall of Kandahar in December 2001, "Lashkar i Taiba in Pakistan had said it was ready to help host them". Despite U.S. pressure on Islamabad to rein in the numerous militant groups it had long supported, al-Qa'ida and other foreign jihadis thus still benefited from the support of some of Pakistan state's proxies. Besides LET, HUA also provided its help in relocating and housing foreign fighters and their families in Pakistan.

Al-Qa'ida's relocation to Pakistan was managed mostly by Abu Zubayda and Khalid Shaykh Muhammad (KSM). Abu Zubayda was a well-known facilitator affiliated to the Khaldan camp in Khost while KSM, who masterminded the 9/11 attacks, oversaw al-Qa'ida's media arm al-Sahab and external operations. These two experienced jihadis had long been operating in Pakistan, mostly in Islamabad and Peshawar for Abu Zubaydah and Karachi for KSM. Together, they leveraged their links with a number of Pakistani jihadi networks to transport and accommodate the Arab fugitives in the country. According to Leah Farrall, "Between them, they organised at least thirteen to fifteen safe houses where people stayed, before moving to other locations in Pakistan or on to Iran". When he was captured in Faisalabad in February 2002, Abu Zubaydah was in a safe house run by LET.

For his part, KSM "helped organize a collection of safe houses in Karachi and elsewhere in Pakistan, many of them operated by jihadi groups like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Harakat-ul-Mujahideen, Jaish-e-Mohammed, Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan, and Lashkar-e-Taiba, with whom KSM had had relations for years". While he was organizing the next al-Qaida attacks overseas, KSM was also busy with "maintaining

a pool of apartments for the ever growing number of Arabs arriving in Karachi”, where his family was “deeply embedded” and where he had long cultivated ties with other local militants. The members of KSM’s network were mainly from these Pakistani militant groups which had been supported by Pakistani intelligence establishment. These ties would continue even after KSM’s arrest in 2003 as others in al-Qa’ida were still connected, as shown by the meeting between Fazlur Rahman Khalil and Bin Ladin in Pakistan in late 2005.

Besides providing significant logistical support to al-Qa’ida and its foreign allies in Pakistan, members of these groups also partnered up with Bin Ladin’s men for operational purposes as shown by the killing of U.S. journalist Daniel Pearl in February 2002. While Pearl’s kidnapping was organized by Pakistani jihadis affiliated to Kashmiri groups, including Omar Sheikh who was released along with Masood Azhar in late 1998, the actual killing of Pearl was handled by al-Qa’ida, via KSM. Once the group learned that their Pakistani allies, such as the sectarian outfit Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, held an American hostage, “a gift from God” according to one of the group’s leaders, it succeeded in capitalizing on the situation by sending KSM and his nephews to Pearl. Once arrived, the trio filmed Pearl reading a script before beheading him.

This operational cooperation also occurred in the case of Pervez Musharraf’s attempted killing in December 2003. While Pakistan blamed the operations on Abu al-Faraj al-Libi, who was then running al-Qa’ida’s activities in the region, the actual planning and execution of the plots were carried out by Pakistani jihadis. Among those was Amjad Hussain Farroqi, a HJI operative close to al-Libi and fellow HJI cadre Ilyas Kashmiri, a former member of Pakistan Army’s special forces with years of fighting experience in Afghanistan and Kashmir. This conglomerate of al-Qa’ida’s core figures and Pakistani militants saw Musharraf as an apostate who needed to be killed owing to Islamabad’s counter-terrorism efforts against al-Qa’ida and foreign jihadi groups in the country.

Besides providing logistical and operational support to foreign jihadis in Pakistan and Afghanistan, Kashmir-focused groups were also involved in external plotting. More specifically, LET’s hands can be found in several terrorist plots and attacks overseas

over the past two decades. In 2002, a maritime plot in the port of Gibraltar was foiled after the authorities arrested an al-Qa'ida cell made of several Saudis. In his confessions, one of the Saudis told the investigators that regarding the funds that he received while staying in Morocco, he was given "several sums of money in the form of donations" from both al-Qa'ida and LET.

But the group also mounted external operations of its own, under the patronage of Sajid Mir, a longtime cadre of the group who handled overseas operatives. It was Mir who acted as the handler of the French convert Willy Brigitte, who trained at LET's training camps between late 2001 and early 2002 and was subsequently dispatched by Mir to plot an attack in Australia together with Faheem Khalid Lodhi, an Australia-based jihadi also trained by LET. After he left Pakistan on Mir's orders, Brigitte went back home before being told by Mir to go to Australia, a travel which was facilitated by his Pakistani handler. Once arrived in May 2003, Brigitte linked up with Lodhi before being arrested. Even though targets had not been decided, Australian investigators found "downloads of the Lucas Heights nuclear reactor along with mpa reference to the Garden Island naval base, the nearby Maritime Headquarters and the Victoria Barracks".

The case of David Headley is also telling. This Pakistani-American worked for LET between 2006 and 2009, when he was arrested in Chicago, and scouted all the targets struck during the Mumbai attacks in November 2008. Besides LET's well-documented role in this deadly operation, Headley's trajectory also help further understand LET's efforts beyond its traditional geographic area. As the Mumbai attacks were approaching in October 2008, Headley met Sajid Mir and his ISI handler Major Iqbal to discuss striking the Jyllands-Posten, the Danish daily which published caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed. Following the Mumbai attacks though, Headley's handlers instructed him to keep a low profile and thus postpone the Danish plot. During his interrogations, Headley also evoked the "Karachi Project" born in 2003 and which consisted in sending LET-trained Indians to launch attacks inside Indian heartland.

3. Pakistani Militant Milieu's "Defectors"

In the years following 9/11, under U.S. pressure, Islamabad launched a number of raids against jihadi groups and military incursions in the tribal areas which were met with growing discontent within Pakistan's militant milieu, especially in the wake of the military operation against the Red Mosque in Islamabad in July 2007. These developments eventually led to the rise of an "anti-state current" at odds with the well-established Kashmir-oriented groups, the most notorious outfit of this current being the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan.

The organization was established by Pakistani tribal militants opposed to Islamabad's support to U.S.' "global war on terror" in the aftermath of 9/11. These elements had fought side by side with the Taliban in Afghanistan and had been supportive of foreign jihadi groups, including al-Qa'ida, which they sheltered in North and South Waziristan after the fall of the Taliban regime. The turning point that galvanized the insurgency against Pakistan and, according to Stephen Tankel, "severed any remaining ties between Pakistan and many of its former proxies" was the bloody storming of the Red mosque in July 2007. This prompted the unification of various militant Pashtun tribal militant figures under the umbrella organization TTP, which declared jihad against Islamabad and whose operations included all Pakistan's seven tribal agencies. According to Abdul Sayed, the newly created entity could also rely on "militants [who] had been part of Kashmir-focused jihadi groups loyal to the Pakistani state".

Despite being an indigenous militant group primarily focused on waging jihad against Islamabad, the TTP has long been cultivating ties with numerous foreign groups and emerged as one of al-Qa'ida's main ally in Pakistan's tribal areas. Its first leader and founder Baitullah Mehsud was one the several Pashtun tribal figures who provided protection to the foreign jihadi diaspora which had relocated to the tribal areas in late 2001. Baitullah Mehsud was publicly praised by al-Qa'ida for his leading role in these efforts: "It was he and the sons of his tribe (the generous heroes) who did that.

Despite all the attacks, destruction, and killings by the hands of the apostate Pakistani Army in the Wazir tribe in the Wana and Shikay areas, who were first to host their migrating and mujahidin brothers (...), he did not stop hosting, aiding, and sheltering his migrating brothers. After they left the Shikay and Wana areas, and with the approval of the amir Baitullah, they headed to the Mehsud tribes”.

In Pakistan’s tribal areas, the TTP, al-Qa’ida and other foreign jihadi factions operated in the same areas and worked together on various issues, including joint-operations in the region. This on-the-ground team work was notably illustrated with the suicide operation against FOB Chapman in Khost, which killed seven CIA officers, in December 2009. Carried out by the Jordanian Abu Dujana al-Khurasani, a well-known contributor to the jihadi forums, the attack was claimed by both al-Qa’ida and the TTP. In its statement, Bin Ladin’s organization stated that the operation was notably to retaliate for the killing of Baitullah Mehsud, which occurred months earlier. While al-Khurasani was interviewed by al-Qa’ida’s media arm al-Sahab before the attack, he also featured on video footage together with Hakimullah Mehsud, Baitullah’s successor, illustrating the close operational links between the two groups.

This close relationship was illustrated by various public releases from al-Qa’ida’s official media outlet al-Sahab, especially in late 2009 in the wake of Baitullah Mehsud’s killing. Following the demise of the leader of the TTP, al-Qa’ida’s leaders Ayman al-Zawahiri and Mustafa Abu al-Yazid issued videos where they praised the infamous Pakistani jihadi commander as a “role model of the youth”. Other Pakistani partners of al-Qa’ida, like Mullah Nazir and TTP’s Wali-ur-Rahman, Hakimullah Mehsud and Ustad Fateh, also featured in videos released by al-Sahab.

Besides its links to a wide range of foreign outfits operating from Waziristan, the TTP also displayed a global flavor to its jihad by recruiting and training for an attack inside U.S. territory. In December 2009, Faisal Shahzad, a naturalized U.S. citizen born in Pakistan, went to Waziristan where he was trained in manufacturing explosives by trainers of the TTP. Shahzad then met with the leader of the group, Hakimullah Mehsud and recorded a video will where he stated that “today, along with the leader of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan Hakimullah Mehsud and under the command of (...) Mullah Muhammad Umar Mujahid (...), we are planning to wage an attack on your

side”. Once back home with his mission in early 2010, Shahzad received money from the TTP twice to help him finance the plot. On May 1, 2010, he parked a truck loaded with improvised explosives in Times Square but failed to detonate the bomb. Hours later, the TTP claimed credit for the failed attack and threatened to wage mount more operations against the U.S.

It is worth noting that the TTP’s global outreach was a topic of discussion in the Abbottabad files. While these materials point to ideological and strategic differences, one letter written by Bin Ladin underlines that the leader of al-Qa’ida was still willing to team up with his “brothers of the Pakistan and Afghanistan Taliban” in the realm of external operations “so that there is complete cooperation between us”. He urged his lieutenant Atiyatallah al-Libi to “tell them that we started planning work inside America many years ago, and gained experience in that field and (...) we should not fall into the error that hurts the Muslims and benefits the enemy, due to lack of coordination between us”. He went on to mention Faisal Shahzad’s failed bombing to bolster his argument, which is that, given that al-Qa’ida has a long experience in global attacks, it should be involved in the external plotting of its Pakistan-based allies, including the TTP, so that they avoid repeating mistakes.

Al-Qa’ida’s growing relationship with local militant groups in Pakistan’s tribal areas in the years following 9/11 eventually led the organization to formally integrate some of these local elements into its structure. This was visible in its media releases in Urdu with Pakistani speakers, some which highlighting the life and death of its Pakistani cadres. Many of these were previously part of the Kashmir-focused Pakistani groups as shown by the case of Badr Mansur, who served as al-Qa’ida’s top man in North Waziristan and participated in virtually all the major operations in Pakistan after the Red mosque episode. He is reported to have “[funneled] in recruits from Kashmiri mujahidin groups such as the Harakat-ul-Mujahidin, with which he was closely linked”.

Perhaps the one who contributed the most to this integration of Pakistani militants into al-Qa’ida’s fold, which eventually led to creation of al-Qa’ida in the Indian Sub-continent, was Ilyas Kashmiri who had long collaborated with the group. Following the raid against the Red Mosque, “he had to take revenge, so he migrated to

Waziristan, where the mujahidin of the TTP and al-Qa'ida was already in action against Pakistan army”, his biography reads. It was in this context that he “started joint operations with al-Qa'ida (...) but this time it was not just ‘Brigade 313’.

The efforts of Kashmiri's group eventually went global as illustrated by the various plots and attacks it mounted outside of the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. Kashmiri's transnational efforts were first seen with the “Mickey Mouse Project”, a plot in which he and David Headley sought to carry out a major attack against the Danish daily Jyllands-Posten in Copenhagen, following LET's order to Headley to postpone the plan. When the two met in Waziristan in 2009, it was decided that Headley would work on Kashmiri's group's behalf following which the American traveled twice to Denmark to scout potential targets. According to the investigation, the idea was to take journalists hostage and to execute them, an operation which would mimic that of Mumbai. The terror plot was foiled with the arrest of Headley in Chicago in October 2009.

But Kashmiri was also keen on striking his old Indian enemy. On February 13, 2010, the attack against a German bakery in the western city of Pune – the first major terrorist attack of its kind in India since the Mumbai attacks - killed 17 people and wounded 64. In a statement released by Mustafa Abu al-Yazid, al-Qa'ida's official in Khurasan, the Egyptian claimed responsibility for the attack : “the operation in India last February – which targeted a place for Jews (...) was waged by one soldier and hero from the brigade of al-Fida'a Soldiers. And it is a brigade from the brigades of Qa'idat al-Jihad in Kashmir, led by the commander Ilyas Kashmiri”.

The arrival and integration of numerous Pakistani jihadis at odds with their former groups into al-Qa'ida led to the creation of AQIS which was announced in August 2014 by Ayman al-Zawahiri. Illustrating the longstanding ties with the Pakistani jihadi landscape, the leader of al-Qa'ida contended that “this entity was not established today, but it is the fruit of a blessed effort for more than two years to gather the mujahidin in the Indian subcontinent into a single entity” and went on to thank the leading forces behind this new outfit, Mustafa Abu al-Yazid, Atiyatullah al-Libi and Badr Mansur, among others.

According to its Emir, “the establishment of AQIS is a call to the Indian Muslims to participate in the global jihad to give a final push to the collapsing edifice of America”. The U.S. and India were frequently described as the main enemies of AQIS in its literature. For example, Ustad Ahmad Farooq, the late head of AQIS’ media department, stated, referring to the killings in Myanmar and Assam : “I warn the Indian government that after Kashmir, Gujarat... you may add Assam to the long list of your evil deeds”. This translated into external plotting as, according to Indian intelligence, al-Qa’ida once urged its local outfit in India to “abduct Israelis from India”.

4. Pakistani Jihadis in the face of Jihad in Syria

While Pakistani jihadi groups, along with their foreign allies, including al-Qa'ida, had long been established in the border region with Afghanistan, the opening of a new front in Syria in the wake of the Arab uprisings in 2011 as well as Pakistani military offensive "Zarb-e-Azb" in June 2014 led to the relocation of a number of Pakistani jihadis outside of their core operational area.

This mini-exodus from Waziristan to the Levantine battlefield is notably illustrated by the case of the TTP. The group publicly expressed its enthusiasm regarding the Arab Spring when in January 2013 its then leader Hakimullah Mehsud maintained in a video that "we support them and we will aid them. If they need our blood, our life; if they need our people, we are ready for every type of assistance".

In July 2013, Mohammad Amin, a Taliban official acting as a "coordinator of the Syrian base", told the BBC that the TTP had sent some of its experienced personnel – "at least 12 experts in warfare and information technology" – to Syria on a fact-finding mission. According to Amin, besides "[assessing] the needs of the Jihad in Syria", TTP members were also dispatched to "work out joint operations with our Syrian friends". Here, the global ties TTP forged over the past years are worthwhile noting since the setting up of a new Levantine base was made with the help of its Arab jihadi allies who had fled Waziristan and relocated to Syria. According to Amin, "They were facilitated by our friends in Syria who have previously been fighting in Afghanistan", pointing to the number of Arab fighters, including from al-Qa'ida, who fled Waziristan to fight against the al-Assad regime. Others interviews with Pakistani Taliban commanders corroborate the nexus with the Syrian jihad. For example, one of them stated to Reuters that they had "established our own camps in Syria. Some of our people go and then return after spending some time fighting there."

It should also be noted that the TTP was not the only actor in the Pakistan-Syria nexus. Indeed, reports stated that the TTP teaming up with Lashkar-i-Jhangvi in sending fighters to Syria. This should come as no surprise as the appeal of the Syrian jihad was partly driven by sectarian concerns as Pakistani militants viewed

themselves as the protectors of the oppressed Syria's Sunni population against al-Assad's forces and their Shi'a allies, chief among them the Iranian regime. Another Pakistani faction reportedly involved in participating in the Syrian war was the group led by Hafiz Gul Bahadur.

While Pakistani jihadi groups involved themselves in a far away conflict, they were also impacted by it. Besides framing some of their attacks at home as a retaliation for the "killing of Sunnis in Syria", they also participated in the founding and subsequent rise of the Islamic State's affiliate in the region known as "Wilayat Khurasan". More specifically, disgruntled commanders of these groups came to coalesce to create this new outfit, which was publicly announced by the mothership in late January 2015. The Islamic State's expansion into this region was spearheaded by "Pakistani militants who had long been settled in the southeastern districts of Nangarhar, in the Spin Ghar mountains or its foothills, bordering the tribal agencies on the Pakistani side of the Durand Line", according to Borhan Osman. Having crossed into southeastern Afghanistan since 2010, they gradually became more independent before eventually splitting up with their hierarchy which failed to restrain their actions which Osman terms as "predatory behaviour".

The impact of the dispatching of Pakistani fighters to Syria on the Islamic State's expansion can be illustrated with the trajectory of Hafiz Saeed Khan, a senior commander of the TTP. Indeed, according to Antonio Giustozzi, Khan was behind the efforts which led to the dispatch of the first Pakistani volunteers to Syria, a decision which was reportedly taken as early as the summer of 2012. In May 2013, after longstanding differences with the TTP's leadership, Khan switched sides and joined the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham but this development would not be public before the summer of 2014 when Khan associated himself with other TTP dissidents to form "Tehrik-e-Khilafat Pakistan" (TKP). Giustozzi claims that "Some of the volunteers who returned from Syria were also appointed to top positions in TKP [and] all the leading figures of TKP were former TTP commanders; similarly the majority of the fighters were formerly of the TTP, even if some Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and Lashkar-e-Taiba fighters also joined, after coming back from Syria". This notably explains why LeJ, while not under this new banner, still "expressed its willingness to cooperate with [Wilayat Khurasan] and acknowledged cooperation in the 2016

Quetta attack that killed 63 individuals”. This breakaway faction would constitute the core of the Islamic State’s province in the region which was announced months later.

From the start, the Khurasani affiliate did not shy away from expressing its hostility towards the rest of the regional jihadi landscape, especially the Taliban and al-Qa’ida, and adopted a confrontational approach with fellow militant groups, denouncing them as “apostates”. In an interview with the Islamic State’s English-speaking magazine Dabiq, Khan contended that “The nationalist Taliban movement only has control of some regions of ‘Afghanistan’, nowhere else [and] they rule by tribal customs and judge affairs in accordance with the desires and traditions of the people, traditions opposing the Islamic Shari’ah”. He went on to denounce the then Taliban emir Akhtar Mansur’s “strong and deep ties with Pakistani intelligence (...). Akhtar Mansur’s advisory council contains members from the Pakistani intelligence!” According to him, these close ties explain why the Afghan Taliban came to fight against the Islamic State’s affiliate.

Indeed, on the ground, what were originally ideological tensions between the two parties gradually came to an all-out war in areas where Khan’s men operated, beginning in their stronghold in Nangarhar in December 2014. While the Taliban, notably helped by AQIS, eventually managed to crush their enemies and significantly reduce their presence in Afghanistan, the Khurasan Province has proven to be still operational, succeeding in striking in the cities of Kabul and Jalalabad and assassinating Taliban commanders.

Even though it did not control territory like it used to, the Khurasan Province can now benefit from the Islamic State’s expansion in the region, notably with the creation of “Wilayat al-Hind” which was announced in May 2019. While the first Islamic State’s attack in Kashmir was claimed by the Khurasan Province in 2017, the mothership then reorganized its provincial structure following the fall of its caliphate in Syria and Iraq in 2019, creating this new entity which then claimed another attack in Kashmir. This was rapidly followed by the announcement of yet another Islamic State’s franchise named “Wilayat Pakistan” which claimed two attacks in Baluchistan in May 2019.

These regional affiliates repeatedly showed that they held a global reach by involving themselves in external operations. The Khurasan Province, for example, helped three individuals to plot bombings and shootings in Times Square and the New-York City subway during the summer of 2016. According to the U.S. authorities, two of the plotters maintained contacts with the Islamic State's outfit, with one stating that "khurasan dawla [ISIS] has o[u]r back". Highlighting the persistence of these global ambitions, German authorities thwarted a plot against U.S. military facilities and personnel by arresting four Tajiks in April 2020. The cell was in "contact with two high-ranking ISIS figures in Syria and Afghanistan", pointing to the Khurasan Province's involvement in this external operation plot.

The Islamic State's operatives have also been active in India, where they tried to launch several attacks in several cities, notably against the Jewish community in Mumbai, with the help of the central organization in Syria and Iraq. Among the most high-profile projects hatched by the Islamic State in the country was that of a cell dismantled in Hyderabad in June 2016. If none of those involved traveled to Syria or Iraq, Mohammed Ibrahim Yazdani, one of the eight members of this cell, was in constant contact with the mothership in Syria and Iraq. Among his interlocutors who facilitated the plot in India was Abu Isa al-Amriki, a well-known "virtual planner" of the Islamic State who participated in multiple plots overseas, including the U.S. Yazdani's handlers helped the cell to obtain weapons and chemicals used to make improvised explosives. The cell intended to strike a number of security facilities, including police stations.

But the threat goes beyond the Islamic State. Soon after the announcement of its creation, AQIS attempted to hijack Pakistan Navy frigates to use them to strike against Indian and U.S. naval ships. "This was not an attack on the naval dockyard... It was a takeover of ships of the Pakistani naval fleet. And the targets were the American and the Indian Navies" stated the media release of the organization. It should be noted here that AQIS expanded beyond its core base in Waziristan to implement itself and recruit inside India. As a result, the group was able to continue to plot against India as shown by the arrest of nine al-Qa'ida operatives in various locations in Indian, including West Bengal and Kerala, in September 2020. According to Indian authorities, "the group was planning to undertake terrorist attacks at vital

installations in India with an aim to kill people and strike terror”. The Indian jihadis reportedly took their orders from al-Qa’ida leaders in Pakistan.

Finally, Kashmir-focused Pakistani groups still active in Afghanistan also remained determined to target India and its interests. In mid-February 2021, for example, Indian authorities claimed that Jaish-e-Mohammed, already responsible for the Pulwama attack in India-administered Kashmir two years earlier, was trying to “identify targets in Dehli”. One operative, “on instructions of his Pakistan handler”, went to Delhi where he scouted the office of India’s national security advisor Ajit Doval before sending the results of his findings back to Pakistan.

5. Risk assessment and policy implications

The Indian subcontinent is currently facing a triple trend in the evolution of the regional jihadi threat:

- The expansion of the international reach of regional organizations with a local agenda shifting to a global one
- The transformation and fragmentation of the regional jihadi scene under the influence of global organizations
- The implication of the regional jihadis in international conflicts, especially in Syria and Iraq

These three trends are leading to an increased pressure from jihadi groups and individuals at the regional level.

As evidenced in recent years and months, risks range from blowback and other side-effects of the jihadis involvement in Syria and other jihadi scenes, to internationally and/or regionally-sponsored terrorist attacks originating from local/regional groups and militants tied to the global jihadi sphere under the aegis of Pakistan.

The current threat landscape and its evolution is strongly tied to the evolution, transformation and fragmentation of historical organizations active in the region since the late 80s and to the continuing alignment of political organs and elites' interests in Pakistan with those of the Pakistani jihadi organizations (for example the annexation of Jammu and Kashmir), whilst several of these organizations have since adhered to the global agenda of terrorist organizations posing a direct threat to neighboring countries, primarily India.

Apart from an extensive cooperation among regional countries against the threat posed by Al-Qa'ida and ISIS, along with their regional affiliates, breaking the political and financial links between Pakistan and local jihadi organizations, some of them active under the guise of social and educational services provided to the population, is key to weaken the reach and threat of these organizations, as such links and support amount to incitement and encouragement.

The synergies between regional groups in the Af-Pak region and the transnational groups like al-Qa'ida and IS are a matter of concern. The expanding global focus of regional groups, whether the LET, JEM, TTP or AQIS is visible from their public statements on international developments.

Increasing influence of radical Islamist ideology in Pakistan will provide the above groups a ready ground for recruiting radicalised youth, willing to carry out coordinated terror attacks or lone wolf attacks in any part of the world. The September 25, 2020 knife attack in Paris by a Pakistani youth, who was swayed by the call of a Bareilvi leader in Pakistan against Charlie Hebdo, is a case in point.

Regional groups like LET, TTP, etc see themselves connected to and as one of the flag bearers of Islam. Their ability to use the networks provided by the IS or AQ, also give them the support required for a global reach.

Further, following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, one is likely to witness a resurgence of the Taliban and probably a more operational coordination between Pakistan-supported groups like the LET & JEM and the Taliban. Further, as brought out in the 11th report of the UN security Council's Analytic Support Sanctions Monitoring Committee, the linkages between Taliban and al Qa'ida were deepening and that AQ was quietly gaining strength in Afghanistan while continuing to operate under the Taliban's protection.

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