

The Al-Qaeda Revival in Pakistan: Challenges and Prospects

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Pakistan remains a country of vital importance for Al-Qaeda. It is primarily because of Al-Qaeda's advent, rise and shelter and not to mention the support the terrorist organization found at the landscape of Pakistan during the last two decades. The emergence of in Pakistan can be traced back to the Afghan War (1979-89), with a brief sabbatical in Sudan the Islamist terrorist group rose to gain prominence after shifting back to Afghanistan. It then became a global 'Islamist' terrorist entity while based in neighboring Afghanistan and found safe havens in the erstwhile tribal areas of Pakistan in the aftermath of the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Prior to its formation in 1988 in Peshawar (Pakistan), it had worked as Maktab al-Khidmat (Services Bureau) during the Afghan War.² It had its roots in Pakistan, which had become a transit point of extremists *en route* to Afghanistan during the War. All high profile Al-Qaeda leaders, later becoming high-value targets, and members of its central Shura had lived in Pakistan at one point in their lives. That is the very reason the Al-Qaeda in Pakistan is termed as *Al-Qaeda Core* or *Central* among law enforcement practitioners and intelligence communities. Without going into details of Al-Qaeda's past in Pakistan the aim of this article is to focus on its current state of affairs and what future lies ahead of it in Pakistan.

The Current State of Affairs

Al-Qaeda's South Asia chapter, the Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) mainly ran its business in Pakistan alongside some locally affiliated groups i.e. Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and its factions (such as Harkat ul Jihad-e-Islami, Harkat ul Mujahedeen, Jamaat ul Ahrar, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Jamaat Ansar al-Sharia Pakistan) (Zahid, 2017)³ and some *splinters*. AQIS was established by Al-Qaeda in September 2014 (BBC, 2014) as a response to the then recently established Islamic State's Khurasan chapter (Rassler, 2008).⁴ The AQIS began with a massive start but

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² Maktab ul Khidmat wal Mujahedeen al-Arabia or Services Bureau for Arab Mujahedeen was established in 1983 by Abdullah Azzam in Peshawar, Pakistan. The non-governmental/charity organization worked as transit facility for Arab Islamist reaching Peshawar to participate in Jihad against the Soviet forces in Afghanistan. The said organization also established a number of guest houses (Bait ul Ansar) in Peshawar for Mujahedeen

³ These organizations are characterized as Al-Qaeda associates and affiliates because of their close liaisons in providing Al-Qaeda safe havens, logistics, joint operations, and at times providing suicide bombers to Al-Qaeda for its operations

⁴ Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent was established by Al-Zawahiri in Sep 2014 right after the IS-K chapter was announced by Islamic State's spokesperson Abu Mohammad al-Adnani in July 2014.

could not continue with its spree of terrorist attacks. The very first AQIS strike was attempted hijacking of PNS Zulfiqar a Pakistan Navy frigate in September 2014 (Golovnina, 2014; Express Tribune, 2016). Later on, the subsidiary organization could not manage to inflict major damage in Pakistan.⁵ Its *Emir* (veteran ‘jihadist’ of Indian descent Asim Umar) reportedly operates from Afghanistan (Personal interview, September 12, 2019) where AQIS also takes part in the insurgency against the Afghan government and US troops (Roggio, 2019). AQIS was established by Al-Qaeda Central to serve a dual purpose: launch terrorist strikes directly under the banner of Al-Qaeda Central and to compete with newly established Islamic State’s Khurasan Wilayah in Pakistan.

With a number of terrorist attacks in Pakistan, the AQIS could not sustain the crackdown by law enforcement bodies; hence, the gained momentum of its activities was reversed in the next few years. On the other hand, IS-K, the local chapter to IS continued to strike terror in different parts of Pakistan. During 2018 and 2019, the AQIS was outperformed by IS-K as far as terrorist activities are concerned. IS-K perpetrated more than 200 terrorist attacks alone in Afghanistan. AQIS, on the other hand, suffered some major losses. The Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) of Karachi police arrested some of its high profile commanders and most-wanted terrorists and the organization could not manage to strike terror in retaliation.

Most important of all catches was the arrest of Umar Jalal Chandio alia Kathio, the Emir of AQIS Sindh province. The CTD Karachi arrested him from Karachi’s Gulshan-e-Iqbal locality on November 20. Chandio inspired the terrorists involved in the Safoora Goth incident in 2015. Before joining IS-K, Tahir Minhas alias Sain (team leader of IS-K Cell involved in the massacre of Shias at Safoora Goth Karachi in 2015) remained a member of AQIS and close to Chandio. A total of 47 members of the Ismail-Shia community were shot dead by the IS-K cell militants near Safoora Goth in the suburbs of Karachi. Chandio’s wife is also said to be an active member of AQIS (Dawn, 2018). After his arrest Raja Umar Khattab, in-charge of CTD Karachi revealed in the press conference:

Jalal was associated with Al Qaeda’s Arab network while Haji Sahib (code name) was active in Karachi and the Wadh area of Balochistan where the group’s mainly Baloch youths were involved in kidnapping for ransom, terrorism, and attacks on NATO forces’ containers.

AQIS commander of Karachi Ahsan Mehsud alias Roshan was arrested from Karachi in March 2018. Mehsud was involved in planning to assassinate secular party Muthadia Quami Movement (MQM) leaders in order to create chaos in the city. He was also considered close to the masterminds of the Safoora Goth incident (Ali, 2018).

Another Al-Qaeda subsidiary Jamaat Ansar al-Sharia Pakistan (a local cell of highly educated militants) that pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda surfaced in 2017 but did not last long (Dawn, 2017). The cell was remained involved in a series of terrorist attacks that swept Karachi during the summer of 2017. At least six terrorist attacks five in Karachi and one in far-flung district Mastung district of Baluchistan province were claimed by Jamaat ul Ansar al-Shariah Pakistan (Zahid, 2017). The cell was busted by

⁵ Here the subsidiary organizations mean the Al-Qaeda affiliates and associates in Pakistan. The militants of these organizations received training at Al-Qaeda-run terrorist training camps in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan (1996-2001).

law enforcement forces in Karachi but its *Emir* Abdul Saroush Siddiqui managed to flee; reportedly to Afghanistan (Personal interview, September 24, 2019).

With these important leadership losses, the AQIS and other Al-Qaeda affiliates the Al-Qaeda Central could not manage to cope up and no terrorist attack was conducted by Al-Qaeda since then in Pakistan, though, TTP another Al-Qaeda associate continues to strike targets in Pakistan's tribal areas and Baluchistan province. There appears to be no direct Al-Qaeda involved in terrorist attacks since major arrests of AQIS commanders and busting of Ansar al-Sharia cell. Despite all this, it is believed that Al-Qaeda *Emir* Ayman al-Zawahiri is hiding somewhere between Pakistan and Afghanistan from where he intermittently releases his recorded video statements. Nevertheless, the death of Hamza bin Laden in the AfPak region indicates that Al-Qaeda still maintains senior operatives in Pakistan (Zahid, 2019).

Challenges

Al-Qaeda in Pakistan, which used to be the most lethal terrorist entity and considered to be the 'original version' now appears to be in shambles. AQIS the local chapter of Al-Qaeda does not seem to be in a position to launch spectacular terrorist attacks in Pakistan. Apart from this, there are some organizational and regional challenges restricting Al-Qaeda and hindering its growth keeping in view of attaining its future objectives in Pakistan.

IS-K

Al-Qaeda splinter (former Al-Qaeda in Iraq) seems to be a serious challenger to Al-Qaeda's dominant position at the jihadi landscape of Pakistan. IS announced the establishment of the IS-Khurasan chapter immediately after the proclamation of the Islamic Caliphate in January 2015 (Basit, 2018) but the interim organizational structure was put in place even earlier than that in July 2014 (Azaz Syed, Personal interview, September 24, 2019). The Walayat-e-Khurasan was initially comprised of defectors from Tehreek-e-Khilafat Afghanistan, TTP, Jundullah, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Tehreek-e-Khilafat Pakistan and some other (south) Punjab-based terrorist groups operating in Pakistan (Giustozzi, 2018). Later on, the IS-K while using the IS's global brand, franchise, caliphate value, and financial resource has been able to lure in local radicalized Islamist youth in Pakistan. Law enforcement bodies in urban centers of Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad, and Sialkot (Zahid & Khan, 2016) have busted a number of IS-K cells. IS-K also established itself in Afghanistan neighboring Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province and remained involved in target killings of military, police, and intelligence officials during 2015-17 (Personal interview, September 26, 2019). The US forces in Afghanistan killed IS-K's first four Emirs but its current *Emir* is a former Lashkar-e-Taiba militant, Shaikh Aslam Farooqi, who leads IS-K from eastern Afghanistan. The IS-K stabilized itself after Aslam Farooqi was appointed *Emir* of Khorasan province in 2017 and confirmed it in 2019 (Haltiwanger & Loanes, 2019). Since then the IS-K has been able to perpetuate consistent terrorist attacks in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

While AQIS is on the verge of becoming dormant the IS-K has been perpetrating scores of terrorist attacks in Pakistan. The IS-K was able to lure in support of local Pakistan Islamist terrorist groups and three Pakistani organizations, previously aligned with Al-Qaeda, namely Tehreek-e-Khilafat Pakistan, Jundullah and TTP (Shahidullah Faction) joined hands with IS-K and pledged allegiance to IS Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (Zahid, 2014). Apart from these local groups, the Afghanistan based Islamic Movement of Afghanistan (IMU) previously allied with Al-Qaeda-C along with Uighur and Chechen terrorist-based groups in Afghanistan pledged allegiance to

IS-K (Sharipzhan, 2015). Amid the rise of IS-K and its parent organization globally the Al-Qaeda's local chapter, AQIS was established. The *raison d'être* of AQIS was to steer Al-Qaeda back into public especially in times of Caliphate and to capitalize on the existing problematic conditions prevailing in Pakistan. AQIS with its veteran leadership of Asim Umar (Joscelyn, 2019) and direct guidance of Zawahiri has hitherto failed to galvanize any support and perpetrate the required number of terrorist strikes in Pakistan to stay alive in media.

Since it's surfacing in Pakistan the IS-K has claimed responsibility of 11 terrorist attacks with some terrorist attacks having fatality rate as high as 149 fatalities in Mustang election rally suicide bombing in July 2018. Recently the IS's central leadership has announced two new *Walayats* in South Asia i.e., *Walayat-e-Pakistan* and *Walayat-e-Hind* after the successful and concerted suicide bombings on Easter in Sri Lanka in April 2019 (Hussein, Sahinkaya, Kajjo, & Jedinia, 2019). To reinvigorate AQIS is indeed a challenge for Al-Qaeda central in order to take advantage of (dwindling) support base in Pakistan especially from the plethora of associated and linked (sectarian-religious-based) terrorist organizations.

Looking for New Leadership

Senior-most Al-Qaeda operatives and members of its high command are either dead or in prisons because of the consistent counter-terrorism efforts carried out by the US forces, drone campaigns, Pakistan military, and law enforcement agencies-led operations in Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen, and renditions by allied countries like Pakistan. Most of the senior leadership was targeted in Pakistan's tribal areas through drone strikes during the 2009-2016 campaign. Some very senior members lost their lives in Pakistan including Sheikh Essa, Abu Laith al-Libi, Khalid Habib, Rashid Rauf, Ilyas Kashmiri, Shaikh Usama al-Kini, Saad bin Laden, Shaikh Dawood, Atiya Abdul ur Rehman and others including Osama bin Laden and his son Khalid Bin Laden during Operation Neptune Spear in May 2011. Other senior members have been arrested by Pakistani security forces and handed over the US.

Currently, Al-Qaeda in Pakistan is short of able leadership to steer, lead, mastermind and command the execution of operations. There seems to be an acute shortage of leaders and recruits at the higher echelon of Al-Qaeda. The only leaders appear to be in the picture is Asim Umar, the *Emir* of AQIS. Other experienced local leaders like Hafeez Pandrani and Jalal Chandio have been arrested whereas some others such as Tahir Minhas and Saad Aziz defected to IS-K. Amid this situation, the AQIS lacks a sound, and seasoned leadership from the 'new' generation in Pakistan to lead the malicious terrorist organization. One hope for AQIS could be Abdul Karim Saroush Siddiqui who is the *Emir* of his own Al-Qaeda affiliated *Jamaat Ansar al-Sharia* Pakistan. Siddiqui is reportedly in Afghanistan where is fighting alongside the Afghan Taliban and AQIS (Personal interview, September 30, 2019).

Shifting of Human Resources and the Destruction of Hideouts

The DNI's release of Bin Laden letters and documents (The Bin Laden Bookshelf) captured during the Abbottabad raid by US Navy Seals indicate Bin Laden's focus on shifting human resources from tribal areas of Pakistan because of the fear of drone strikes in the region (Bin Laden's Bookshelf, n.d.). Moreover, Al-Qaeda also shifted its key leaders to Syria, Iraq and elsewhere because of pressure built up during security operations launched by Pakistani security forces in erstwhile FATA (tribal areas) of Pakistan. These operations were intensified after Al-Qaeda senior militants such as Abu Laith-al-Libi and others were found involved in masterminding terrorist attacks on the life of President General Pervez Musharraf (in 2003 and 2004). Some of Al-Qaeda's

hideouts provided by TTP were also destroyed during military operations. Similarly, Al-Qaeda operatives managed to find refuge in urban centers like Karachi, Lahore, Faisalabad, and Rawalpindi. However, most of these hideouts were traced and operatives were either arrested or killed during encounters with law enforcement forces. With these consecutive security measures, the Al-Qaeda clout started to shrink in Pakistan, nonetheless, its influence remains and no major terrorist organization joined hands with IS-K with the exception of a few, as mentioned above. Presently it could be rightly assessed that all major Al-Qaeda high profiles such as Khalid al-Ayuri, Saif al-Adl, Abu Khair al-Masri, and others are no more in Pakistan-Afghanistan border regions. The only exception could be Ayman al-Zawahiri, who regularly releases video-statements but there appears to be no concrete intelligence about his whereabouts.

Future Prospects

Despite these serious challenges Al-Qaeda still has reasons to believe that it could make its resurgence in Pakistan. The following are some critical (forthcoming) events and/or factors that may allow Al-Qaeda to regain its lost momentum.

Afghan Taliban Back in Power

The recent Doha Talks between Afghan Taliban and the US Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad appeared to come to fruition with a possible end of the US's longest war. The talks are mostly about the US's exit strategy from Afghanistan rather than culminating into a viable and peaceful Afghanistan. The civil conflict between the Afghan government and the Afghan Taliban after the US withdrawal seems inevitable. This would also help bring Al-Qaeda back into action. The weak Afghan government may not be able to sustain the Afghan Taliban onslaught. This may be a too pessimistic scenario but there are chances of Afghan Taliban back in Kabul and during all these peace talks between the US and Taliban, the Taliban has not promised to oust Al-Qaeda from Afghanistan rather the Afghan Taliban spokesperson Suhail Shaheen has recently denied Al-Qaeda involvement in the 9/11 attacks (Taylor, 2019). This clearly shows an Afghan Taliban tilt in favor of Al-Qaeda. The senior leadership of Al-Qaeda has big hopes for the Afghan Taliban getting back into power. The AQIS is already fighting alongside the Afghan Taliban against US and Afghan security forces in Afghanistan since its inception in 2014. The discovery of the largest ever terrorist training camp run and managed by AQIS in Sharabak, Kandahar in 2017 is a vital proof of AQIS activities in Afghanistan (Joscelyn, 2015). The Emir of AQIS Asim Umar is reportedly operating from Ghazni province in Afghanistan whereas other senior leaders are expected to be in and around Afghan Taliban strongholds in Afghanistan such as Zabul, Kandahar, Ghazni, Paktia, Paktika, Logar, and Helmand. From the viewpoint provided in AQIS magazine *Nawa-e-Afghan Jihad*, the AQ Core is closely watching the proceedings in Doha with high hopes of Afghan Taliban returning to power.

A Diminished IS-K

Another prospect of Al-Qaeda revival in the region is the destruction of IS-K and a complete collapse of its order. Currently, the IS-K operates from Nangarhar province of eastern Afghanistan bordering Pakistan's tribal districts, whereas its associated cells still have footprints in the various cities of Pakistan. It is evident with the busting of IS-K networked cells in Karachi, Lahore, Sialkot, and Islamabad by security forces. During an interview, it was revealed that, at present, the IS-K strategy for Pakistan is depending upon existing, to an extent, dormant networks of domestic terrorist organizations fresh operatives from both the universities and urban centers. Initially, the IS-K brand worked well to recruit a good number of young, educated and urbanized

individuals who joined the organization while pledging allegiance to Caliph Baghdadi. The momentum seems to reverse after the fall of Raqqa and Mosul and an overall shrinking of IS territories in Iraq and Syria. The IS-K has been facing a number of enemies at the same time, that is to say, Afghan security forces, US forces, Pakistani security forces, and the Afghan Taliban. Despite these odds against it the IS-K has proved to be a resilient organization and has hitherto been able to survive the onslaught and loss of four consecutive *Emirs*. This situation may not last forever as the Afghan Taliban have not allowed IS-K to gain much ground in Afghanistan and in Pakistan the security forces have taken stern actions against any possible IS-K surge in Pakistan. The US forces have dropped the 'Mother of All Bombs' (MOAB) at IS-K safe havens near the Pakistan border (Cooper & Mashal, 2017) and Afghan security forces have conducted numerous operations against the IS-K militants. A scenario with a diminished and defeated IS-K would only allow AQIS to gain space for itself.

The Case of Pakistan

As mentioned previously, Al-Qaeda was born in Pakistan in the backdrop of the Afghan War. The terrorist entity has roots and origins in Pakistan and also because of the number of years it spent, thus developed strong socio-political imprints. No other global terrorist organization such as Hizb ut Tahrir or IS has been able to make inroads as Al-Qaeda had in Pakistan. Similarly, the organization managed to converge multiple pre-existing (sectarian and/or religiously motivated) terrorist organizations into its broader *master-identity*. For instance, a number of pre-existing organizations have overlapping memberships and working relations with Al-Qaeda. Amid this situation, Al-Qaeda could once again restore such 'capital'. This aspect is important to be considered as Al-Qaeda has been able to achieve the same in Syria when two new groups (led by Al-Qaeda) veteran Sami Hijazi and established Jamaat Haraas ud Din and Ansar al-Tawhid in an effort to revive itself in Syria after its former franchises IS and Hayat ut Tahrir-al-Sham decided to part ways with Al-Qaeda. These organizations are formed while luring in members of other terrorist groups operating in the region. Both organizations operate separately but are in close contact and at times share resources for operational and logistical purposes in conjunction with Uighur Islamist terrorist group Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP) in Idlib province of Syria and in its surroundings.

Conclusion

Keeping in view of the 'resilience' of Al-Qaeda it would not be ill-conceived to think of Al-Qaeda as a spent-force. The consistent targeting of Al-Qaeda's high profiles in drones and other means of counter-terrorism has led to the (temporary) fall of Al-Qaeda especially in South Asia and Pakistan in particular. The rise of IS is another factor that caused Al-Qaeda to take a back seat at the global scene. It would be pertinent to say that surfacing of IS has allowed Al-Qaeda to take a sigh of relief as all guns turned towards IS providing it a strategic retreat to regroup and re-emerge with a new strategy. What would be Al-Qaeda's long-term goals is a serious question but before that the terrorist entity needs to reinvigorate itself. There are of course challenges that may hinder its revival but certainly, there are prospects of its resurfacing as a potent and more lethal force. Indeed Pakistan has taken commendable steps towards countering terrorism and violent extremism, yet according to many scholars and practitioners, the environment remains conducive to Al-Qaeda's reinvigoration and revival. On the other hand, the return of the Afghan Taliban back in Kabul would help revive Al-Qaeda in the land controlled by their former hosts. This is indeed an alarming situation. Counter-terrorism during the last two decades has cost billions to the US economy in particular while fighting Al-Qaeda and a plethora of associated groups worldwide. It would be

even costlier to restart a war against a revived Al-Qaeda in the region. The Al-Qaeda revival may also embolden the resolve of its supporters and sympathizers and this would usher in a new era of fighting terror against a new and more resolute generation of its militants causing much more trouble than ever. The need of the hour is to plan possible counter-terrorism measures in advance to contain Al-Qaeda revival in Pakistan while eliminating all predictable possibilities.

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