
The Threat of ISIS in Afghanistan: An Overstatement



Regional Studies
Vol XXXIV, Issue 2
pp.110-127
© Author(s)
<http://irs.org.pk>
P-ISSN: 0254-7988
E-ISSN: 2959-5459

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Date of Acceptance: 1 February 2016

Introduction

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) also known as Daesh has made inroads into the already complex situation of Afghanistan. ISIS's network in Afghanistan aims to merge parts of the present day Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan in its domain known as the Khorasan province of its empire extending eastwards from the Middle East. It has chosen the ancient name of 'Wilayat-e-Khorasan' for this region and wishes to annex it to the so-called caliphate of Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi who is the self-proclaimed Emir-ul-Momineen of ISIS.¹ ISIS which is considered to be the successor of Al-Qaeda in Iraq is a threat not only to peace and stability in the Middle East but to the international community as well. It adheres to a rigid Sunni Salafist ideology based on Abd Al-Wahhab's 'Takfiri' doctrine which perceives those Muslims as non-believers who do not practise the tenets of Islam.² ISIS is the ultimate culmination of problems that have been mounting in the Middle East for years: brutal dictatorships, religious extremism, sectarian hatred, foreign interventions, proxy wars, and a sense of hopelessness and anger among people. ISIS funds its activities through illicit proceeds from occupation of territory such as looting banks, extortion, control of oil fields and refineries, robbery of economic assets, and illicit taxation of goods. The list also includes money obtained from kidnapping for ransom, proceeds from human trafficking, donations from non-profit organizations, smuggling of cultural artefacts, and fundraising through modern communication networks. ISIS gained its largest reserves when it got hold of the town of Mosul in Iraq, some 400 km north of the capital Baghdad, in June 2014. It looted bank deposits estimated to be worth 240 million pounds (\$342 million) in the city. The captured oilfields in the Middle East provide nearly 1.8 million pounds (\$2.6 million) per day to ISIS through oil smuggling to neighbouring countries.³

The physical nexus of ISIS's terror network across countries seems to be strengthening. ISIS is trying to get its toehold in Afghanistan, a country

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passing through a bloody phase in its history for the past 35 years. To understand the scope of ISIS in Afghanistan, it is important to keep in mind the dynamics of the country and the surrounding region. Afghanistan is a land-locked country, situated at the crossroads of three regional powers: Iran, China, and Pakistan, along with two other regional powers: Russia and India as distant neighbours. The three Central Asian states: Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan are situated in the north of Afghanistan. Afghanistan is an ethnically diverse country. The majority of Afghans, i.e., nearly 42 per cent are Pashtuns, followed by 27 per cent Tajiks, and less than 10 per cent each of Uzbeks, Hazaras, Turkmens, Aimaks, and Baloch.⁴ The largest majority the Pathans or Pashtuns inhabit the slopes and plains of south and eastern Afghanistan. This Pashtun belt extends eastwards to the north-western part of Pakistan. All Pashtuns, however, do not live in Afghanistan; there are an equal number of Pashtuns living across the border in the tribal agencies and the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province of Pakistan.⁵ Almost 80 per cent of the population of Afghanistan is Sunni, except the Hazaras of central Afghanistan and the Ismailis of north-eastern Afghanistan who are Shia.⁶

This paper argues that the new entrant ISIS does not have a permanent future in Afghanistan although its emergence has made permanent peace in the country a remote possibility by complicating the already intricate relations between various actors representing divergent interests. The tribal, religious, and traditional ground realities would eventually hinder flourishing of ISIS on the Afghan soil since it lacks indigenous roots and deep ideological entrenchment. ISIS's rise in the country is used by the Afghan government to attain further financial and military benefits from the United States to strengthen its own position in Kabul. The Afghan Taliban have a presence and deep roots in the country where they have already been fighting more than a decade-long war against foreign invasion and are a reality to contend with for ISIS. To understand the strengths and weaknesses of the two movements, it is essential to understand the ideological alignment, strategic objectives, mass public support, and sectarian differences between them. All these questions have been addressed in this paper, followed by a conclusion which includes a possible solution to this puzzling situation.

ISIS: An imminent threat

In March 2015, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani stated before the US Congress that the self-proclaimed caliphate of ISIS was a serious threat for Afghanistan. A month earlier, the Pentagon had remarked that ISIS's presence was 'nascent at best' but this changed into 'operationally emergent' by October 2015. The US commander in Afghanistan General John Campbell added that the group had gained a foothold in Helmand and Farah provinces in the southwest and Nangarhar in eastern Afghanistan.⁷ ISIS fighters have infiltrated through loose border controls around Afghanistan from Syria, Iraq, and also Pakistan. It is estimated that there are approximately 1,000 ISIS fighters in Afghanistan. Reports claiming ISIS's rise in Afghan provinces are abundant in the foreign media stating that it is recruiting Taliban fighters by spending large amounts of

money while perpetrating atrocities which have become synonymous with its name. The Afghan Taliban movement also suffered a momentary setback when news about the death of its former leader Mullah Muhammad Omar broke out last year, and ISIS was quick to take advantage of the situation by trying to attract the dissatisfied members of the movement. The situation is further complicated by mistrust among certain factions in the Afghan government on Pakistan's honest attempts at negotiations between the Taliban and the Kabul. This mistrust and problematic attitude of the Afghan government clearly destroyed the amiable atmosphere during the peace efforts between the Taliban and the former in July last year.⁸ The meeting was hosted by Pakistan in Murree and aimed at ending the 14 years of war in Afghanistan while the US and China acted as observers.

Efforts to revive this peace process were actualized in Kabul in January 2016 where Afghanistan, Pakistan, China, and the United States held talks aimed at laying the ground for a negotiated end to the 14 years of war between US-supported government forces and Taliban insurgents.⁹ The ultimate objective of this diplomatic process is to bring the Afghan government and representatives of the Taliban movement together to decide the future of Afghanistan and reach a peaceful settlement acceptable to all stakeholders. International experts on Afghanistan have also stressed the significance of the involvement of Taliban in any process for deciding the country's future. The Taliban now control more territory than at any time since it was ousted by a US-led intervention in 2001, but in spite of intensified fighting on the battlefield, a political solution is considered the likely answer to the unending conflict. Some elements among the ruling elite in Kabul¹⁰ as well as in the US Army do not, however, wish the involvement of Taliban in any sort of peace negotiations. This perspective was aptly voiced by General John Campbell during his address in the House Armed Services Committee in February. The general stated that the US should maintain its forces for the next five years in Afghanistan in order to assist the Afghan Security Forces against Taliban and other insurgents.¹¹ This mindset is not reflected in President Obama's efforts to pressurize Pakistan to include the Taliban representatives in the peace negotiations though. This divergence is deepening as reports of rampant corruption by Afghan government officials and its increasing burden on the national budget are discussed in the US Congress (the US has spent \$6 trillion to maintain its troop presence in Afghanistan since 2001).

On the eastern side of the Durand Line in Pakistan, academics claiming the rise of ISIS on Pakistan's territory ignore certain ground realities, especially after the ongoing and successful Zarb-e-Azb military campaign cleansed Pakistani soil from thousands of militants and their terror networks.¹² Taking into account the claims by Pakistan's armed forces regarding the dismantlement of militant hideouts, it is not possible for the militant groups to gain foothold in a region which has become hostile to the existence of such militancy.¹³ The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and foreign militant organizations, such as: the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Al-Qaeda, and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) have been flushed out of the tribal areas and pushed

into neighbouring Afghanistan. As a result, it is highly unlikely for them or their kindred to gain foothold in the same region concurrently. Claims of ISIS gaining hold in Pakistan as well as its being a fertile place for extremist groups are self-contradictory and unconvincing.¹⁴ Pakistan may have turned a blind eye to many militant networks existing and operating from its soil in the past but this scenario has changed altogether after 2002. After the attacks on the Karachi Airport in June 2014¹⁵ and the Army Public School in December 2014,¹⁶ in particular, the public has been repulsed by the attitude of militants. Where there might have been sympathisers previously in various sections of society, few would now openly exhibit support for such militancy. It is incoherent that when one terrorist network has been eradicated from a certain region, another network starts establishing its roots especially when both share the same ideology and have nothing new to offer except extreme brutality. The mass appeal for militant organisations seems to be on the decline in Pakistan at present. It is true that supporters of ISIS have been discovered in recent incidents in Karachi¹⁷ and Lahore¹⁸ but swift action by the authorities only proves zero tolerance for such militant organisations in the post-Zarb-e-Azb scenario. Furthermore, these ISIS suspects are not outsiders but local militants who have been motivated and inspired by the extremist group. Pakistan lacks jihadi space due to the existence of several militant groups and there does not appear to be much room for ISIS except perhaps in some of the tribal agencies and districts. Prospects of ISIS's growth seem bleak at present but Pakistan needs to be vigilant as the group's sympathisers and possible sleeper cells could pose a threat in future.¹⁹

Afghan government has voiced a lot of concerns about the rise of ISIS in Afghanistan, but according to Barnett Rubin, the ideologies of the Afghan Taliban and ISIS are not only distinct but antagonistic to each other.²⁰ At times the two entities are carelessly joined together as jihadi organisations but it is to be noted that the Afghan Taliban are not global jihadists. The Afghan Taliban on the whole are much more mature because they have existed since 1995. They had been fighting a home-enemy during the 1990s, but since 2001 the movement has been giving tough resistance to the US and allied forces. Their ideology may be described as a continuation of the former ideology of the Taliban movement before 2001, that is, a mixture of tribal traditions and their own brand of Islam.²¹ But there are some new aspects to the movement after the onset of the war on terror. For example, they have taken clear positions on maintaining their identity separate from Al-Qaeda and limiting their objectives only to the territorial boundary of Afghanistan. They are also ready to consider a power sharing arrangement with the Afghan government for a peaceful solution in Afghanistan.²² Furthermore, the Afghan Taliban have always stressed that their jihad is restricted to Afghanistan and its liberation from foreign rule.

After the news of the demise of Mullah Omar, the Taliban movement suffered momentarily and was in danger of splitting into splinter groups with the probability of certain elements joining the ISIS. The latter tried to seize the opportunity during the confusion over Taliban leadership, but it turned out to be short-lived, and was soon followed by the capture of Kunduz by the Taliban, which encouraged the confused groups to gravitate towards the Taliban rather

than ISIS. Some observers argue, however, that amid the fluid security situation in Afghanistan, ISIS may gain strength and would pose a threat to both Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The Afghan Taliban and ISIS: A comparison

Ideology and leadership

Defining the ideology of the Afghan Taliban is tricky. The Taliban are mainly Pashtuns but there are many Tajiks, Uzbeks, supporters of the former Afghan king Zahir Shah, and even former communists in their ranks. Taliban are Sunni Hannafi and proclaim that they are neither *Deobandi* nor *Barelvi* but their puritanical religious orientation brings them close to the *Deobandi* school.²³ On the other hand, ISIS professes to establish a caliphate over all Muslims and their would-be domain is stretched across the areas comprising the present day Syria, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asian states, and even Pakistan in the East. They also profess an extremely strict version of Islam based on 'literal teachings' of the Quran which they have already enforced in the areas under their control in Iraq and Syria. In view of experts, ISIS's so-called jihad is aimed at gaining territory, control of economic resources, and punishing those Muslims whom the organisation considers outside the realm of Islam, i.e., 'Takfirism'.

The Taliban pledge allegiance to Mullah Akhtar Mansour whereas ISIS considers Abu Bakar Al-Baghdadi as the Emir-ul-Momineen. Mullah Omar had been the leader of the Afghan Taliban, formally called the 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan' since their rise in 1994 until recently²⁴ when it was announced that he had died two years earlier.²⁵ The new Emir of the Afghan Taliban Mullah Akhtar Mansour wrote a letter to ISIS leader in Baghdad to complain that by extending its operations in Afghanistan, ISIS was weakening the jihad against foreign invaders in the country. Some analysts believe that rivalry between the Taliban and ISIS is based largely on controlling trade and smuggling routes passing through Jalalabad enroute to Peshawar and international markets.

Tactical and strategic differences

The most dangerous aspect of ISIS seems to be the indoctrination of young children to train them from an early age, and familiarize them with ammunition from the start. It reflects the fact that ISIS considers military training more important than any serious kind of learning. Taliban on the other hand ensure that young children learn the Quran and Hadith before being ready for any kind of military training. Emphasis on military training by familiarizing young hands with the use of guns and grenades reflects on the mercenary nature of the organisation; a trained and equipped hand can be hired by anyone able to give a good price for achieving certain objectives. Lack of basic education or any kind of values promotes a psyche akin to what Pakistan experienced in the form of the TTP, which was being used by certain regional actors for their own interests against Pakistan. The TTP had its fair share of criminal, uneducated, and unethical minds which wreaked havoc in Pakistan and now the same kind of groups have taken shelter under the name of ISIS in Afghanistan. The TTP had

been targeting military and civilian installations in Pakistan for several years. According to Vali Nasr the number of Pakistanis killed by them on the tenth anniversary of 9/11 in suicide bombings was nearly 35,000.²⁶ After a series of negotiations, peace deals, and military operations spread over more than a decade, the government of Pakistan and military establishment finally lost patience after the attack on Karachi airport on 8 June 2014 and launched a full-scale military operation against TTP terrorists hiding in the mountainous areas of Pakistan near the Pak-Afghan border.²⁷

Since the former TTP members comprise the main fighting force of ISIS in Afghanistan, it is essential to look at some of the characteristics of the parent organisation. The TTP chief Mullah Fazlullah had fled to Afghanistan in 2009. Pakistan government asked the former Afghan president Hamid Karzai for his extradition as well as closure of all militant training camps and hideouts in Kunar and Nuristan provinces in Afghanistan. It is believed that Afghan intelligence had been providing support to the TTP in order to use them as a 'bargaining chip' with Pakistan over the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqanis.²⁸ The Afghan government had been supporting the insurgent movement in Pakistan's tribal areas and it is suspected that they had also been funding the TTP.²⁹ *The New York Times* reported last year that the US Special Forces raided an Afghan convoy that was taking a senior TTP militant Latif Mehsud to Kabul for secret talks and arrested him (he is still in their custody in Bagram jail). The report added that the Afghan government was using TTP as leverage over Pakistani military in order to dictate their terms for a peaceful settlement. The report further added that Karzai and his entourage were furious when their plan was exposed by the American forces.³⁰ Contrary to this, the Afghan Taliban consider the Kabul government as their prime target since they believe that the government has been imposed on the country by foreign powers.

Sources of financing

One of the advisers of Khan Said (alias Sajna), the head of a splinter group of TTP which separated from it in June 2014, told the media in an interview that they had differences with TTP and considered it 'haram' to take money from kafirs to kill fellow Muslims. This was a clear reference that some of the factions in the TTP were on the payroll of foreign intelligence agencies such as the National Directorate of Security (NDS) of Afghanistan and the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) of India. Sajna's close aide blamed TTP of receiving money from outside sources for bombing mosques and madrassas in Pakistan and carrying out criminal activities such as robbing banks, extortion, and kidnapping for ransom. Several other allied factions of TTP were also considering whether to remain aligned with it or side with Khan Said.³¹ A report from the US State Department also disclosed that TTP raised funds from stealing and re-selling military equipment, kidnapping for ransom, and robbing Afghanistan-bound military transport trucks belonging to NATO.³² India has invested \$2.1 billion in Afghanistan³³ in infrastructure projects and is suspected to be using its influence and resources in fuelling the insurgency in Pakistan as well as brewing turmoil in Balochistan. Several militants arrested in 2009 disclosed that NDS and RAW were involved in providing money and arms to

militants to fight Pakistan Army.³⁴ These militants disclosed that they regularly met intelligence officials in Jalalabad, Kandahar, and Mazar-i-Sharif and received special war training in Afghanistan. An Afghan government adviser told media that India was using Afghan territory to destabilize Pakistan. RAW has close links with the NDS consisting of intelligence-sharing on Pakistan. Several research institutes and think tanks in the US have tried to trace links between TTP and RAW working under the garb of reconstruction in Afghanistan. An article in one of Gatestone Institute's publications states that there is evidence of safe havens for terrorists on Afghan soil which are being used for carrying out terrorist activities in Pakistan.³⁵ It must be added here that India has set up consulates in Jalalabad, Kandahar, and Mazar-i-Sharif. It is also building roads and schools near the Pak-Afghan border. India was one of the countries supporting Northern Alliance before 2001, which makes up the present Afghan government and has enjoyed close links with the predecessor of NDS, the Khadamat-e Aetla'at-e Dawlati (KHAD) for decades. Several intelligence officers in NDS have been trained in India in recent years. *Foreign Policy* magazine quoted a former US intelligence official as saying:

“The Indians are up to their necks in supporting the Taliban (TTP) against the Pakistani government in Afghanistan and Pakistan... the same anti-Pakistani forces in Afghanistan also shooting at American soldiers are getting support from India. India should close its diplomatic establishments in Afghanistan and get the Christ out.”³⁶

Most important is the Afghan Taliban's own point of view regarding the ISIS phenomenon. They think that the present Kabul government is trying to involve Russia once again in the Afghan affairs on the pretext of a so-called threat of ISIS. The Taliban view President Ashraf Ghani's government as crying wolf over ISIS to manipulate Russia and other Central Asian states to provide military and logistical assistance. The Afghans resent the political engagements between Russia and the Kabul government. The following excerpt has been taken from the Afghan Taliban's official website:

“It is an open fact that the emergence of ISIS in our country is a joint project of Kabul administration and other foreign intelligence agencies. Similarly, some high ranking officials of Kabul administration have also repeatedly exposed these secrets. For example, few months ago, the then governor of Paktika province asserted that: ‘the National Security Council of Afghanistan has given two hundred thousand dollars in assistance to the families of ISIS fighters in Barmal district of that province’. On 23 November 2015, the so called deputy speaker of Wolasi Jirga (national assembly) publicly stated in open session of the assembly that: ‘our government, military institutions and security council are supporting ISIS (Daesh). I swear by God, the commanders of ISIS are living in Kabul. They go to embassies and our offices...’.”

Therefore, the Afghan Taliban consider the threat of ISIS to be a concoction of the Kabul government to garner support from Russia which they think is neither in the interest of Russia nor the Afghans since the mujahideen are already fighting a war of independence against foreign invaders. The Taliban have also categorically stated that their armed struggle is for the independence of Afghanistan and setting up of an Islamic system in their country. They also desire cordial relations with all regional countries including Russia. This negates any notions of global jihad on their part.³⁷ As far as funding sources for the Afghan Taliban are concerned, Afghan officials have often admitted that ammunition to the Taliban comes from northern Afghanistan through the black market, illegal imports from Iran, and even from local administrators who exchange weapons for immunity from Taliban attacks.³⁸ Other sources of financing include Afghan traders and transporters who have supported the Taliban since 1990s for opening trade routes in Afghanistan and keeping them safe, philanthropist organisations especially from the Middle-East, *Ushr* from Afghan farmers (compulsory charity from agricultural land), *Zakat* collections, commissions from local commanders, and last but not the least it has been alleged by US and Afghan authorities that Iranian government supplies funds, weapons, and other facilities to Taliban.³⁹ China has already invested \$3 billion in Afghanistan and has established ties with the Afghan Taliban, and there are even unconfirmed reports that a Taliban delegation went to Russia for this purpose.⁴⁰ The opium produced in southern Afghanistan also helps finance the Taliban insurgency. Although the Taliban did not create the narcotics trade network, the movement has received its initial funding in 1994 from this trade mafia. They are, however, not the only ones to benefit from this lucrative trade as other Afghan power-brokers including members of the Afghan government also benefit from it.⁴¹

Sectarian differences

The sectarian differences between the Afghan Taliban and ISIS could play a decisive role in ISIS's recruiting capacity. Even the people unhappy with the Taliban may not join their ranks because of an ideology alien to Afghan nature. ISIS's sectarian inclination which is a mix of extreme Salafist philosophy cannot co-exist in a culture of deeply entrenched customs and traditions. Undeterred by the sudden news of the demise of Mullah Muhammad Omar last year and the consequent dispute within the Taliban ranks over succession, none among the Taliban considered choosing Baghdadi as their new Emir. It should be noted that nearly all leaders of ISIS in Afghanistan belong to the TTP which has been pushed out of its sanctuaries in the north-western areas of Pakistan into Afghanistan. This is evident by the growth or presence of ISIS in adjoining provinces of Nangarhar and Logar in Afghanistan. The IMU is noteworthy as it has also professed allegiance to ISIS.

On the other hand, the Taliban movement was not entirely constituted of students since it was joined by Afghan war veterans, members from the disintegrated Afghan Army and the mujahideen parties. The movement and its leadership were indigenous to Afghanistan and shared the same Pashtun

camaraderie which existed among the Pashtun tribes. It was not the ideology of Taliban or any religious sentiments that led to their success in the 1990s but the war-weariness of Afghan nation, which made it willing to welcome any movement which could pave the way for peace, stability, and deliverance from evil warlords.⁴²

Loose unity of groups

Despite big claims, ISIS has only been successful in drawing few figures from the mainstream Taliban movement.⁴³ ISIS in Afghanistan is composed mainly of runaway members of the TTP who have tried to gain control over a few districts in the Nangarhar province across the Pakistan border.⁴⁴ These deserters from among the Taliban fighters also include those foreign fighters who were unable to reach Syria and Iraq. Former TTP member Hafiz Saeed has been appointed as the ISIS Emir of the so-called Khorasan province. It has also been claimed by local Afghans that ISIS has more money than the Taliban since the former are claimed to be paying \$700 per month to their soldiers while Taliban only pay a tenth of this amount. This amounts to a lot of money in a country where nearly 70 per cent of the population is unemployed.⁴⁵

Like the TTP, ISIS is also a loose array of militant groups with widely varying agendas. TTP in itself was an umbrella organisation, composed of almost thirty militant groups⁴⁶ among which the Tehreek e Nifaz e Shariat e Muhammadi (TNSM) was a mainstream group, operating in Bajaur Agency before start of the military operation Zarb-e-Azb in 2014. The Swat faction of the group had tried to gain control of the Swat Valley in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa but the army in a large-scale military operation in 2007-2009 was successful in seizing control of these areas.⁴⁷ Other large groups operating in Bajaur were Jaish-e-Islami led by Wali-ur-Rehman, Karwan-e-Niamatullah (now defunct), Dr. Ismail's faction, and Maulana Abdullah's militants. Omar Khalid's group had been operating out of Mohamand Agency. The three Taliban groups operating in Darra Adam Khel were *Tehreek-e-Islami*, *Islami Taliban*, and *al-Hezb*.⁴⁸ *All factions in the TTP were not in favour of attacking Pakistan and this dissent had grown over the past two years. Some groups thus split from TTP in favour of peace talks with the government.*⁴⁹ The TTP also included extremist sectarian groups: Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) as well as banned jihadist organisations like Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, Harkat-ul-Jihad-e-Islami, Jamiat-ul-Ansar, Jaish-e-Muhammad, and Harkat-ul-Ansar.⁵⁰ The members of some of these organisations belong to southern Punjab and are collectively known as the Punjabi Taliban.⁵¹ Militants from Al-Qaeda, IMU, ETIM, Chechnya, and other Central Asian states were also in close alliance with the TTP, but have now almost been eradicated from the tribal areas or have run away to adjoining provinces in Afghanistan.

ISIS's signature brutality

ISIS is famous for its savage punishments. Its appearance in Afghanistan in 2014 involved the hanging of nearly a dozen Taliban commanders in the Nuristan province. In another incident ten tribal elders were

made to sit on explosives and blown up making their bodies scatter over a long distance.⁵² It was reported that the ISIS chief Hafiz Saeed and Mawlawi Abdul Rahim Dost developed differences and broke up after this incident.

Public support

ISIS cannot exploit political vacuum in Afghanistan for the spread of its ideology, the way it did in Syria and Iraq by taking advantage of the political space available as a representative of Sunnis. As compared to the Afghanistan of the late 1980s, the present scene does not require a ‘champion’ for a political cause. The Afghan Taliban had arisen due to the disenchantment of the population with warlordism and mujahideen most of whom were involved in corruption, rape, looting, and drug trafficking in the state of affairs after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. In 1994, Mullah Muhammad Omar, one of the jihad veterans from Kandahar who had fought under the leadership of Abdul Rasul Sayyaf (one of the mujahideen commanders), gathered ‘*Talibs*’ (seminary students) to cleanse the society from the barbarism of the warlords. The Taliban movement came to be known formally as the Tehreek-e-Islami-e-Taliban Afghanistan.⁵³ ‘*Talibs*’ had existed even during the Afghan jihad in 1980s. Seven factions of the mujahideen existed during that era, religious students joined them to fight the Soviets. Thousands of religious seminaries were established alongside the Afghan border by the military establishment of Pakistan. Afghan refugees, mostly belonging to the *Deobandi* school of thought, joined these madrassas.⁵⁴ The main objective was to create religious-oriented fighters to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan and almost thirty thousand students from such madrassas joined the Taliban movement.⁵⁵ The Taliban movement has survived so far by sustaining on the collection of taxes from areas under its jurisdiction including those imposed on poppy. They also obtain cuts from businesses and construction contracts which are adequate for them to sustain themselves. It is pointed out by researchers that Iran is reportedly funding the Taliban to stop the spread of ISIS on the Afghan territory. Iran is reported to be supplying AK-47 rifles, rocket propelled grenades, and materials for making bombs.⁵⁶

Conclusion and policy recommendations

There are distinct tribal, cultural, and religious obstructions to ISIS’s success in Afghanistan. Presently, the Afghan territory is either controlled by the government in Kabul or the Afghan Taliban. Interestingly, both are averse to ISIS. There is absence of free territory in Afghanistan for ISIS to establish itself, unlike in Iraq, Syria, and Libya. Therefore, although it is extremely difficult for it to establish its rule on the Afghan soil, ISIS would be a constant thorn in the side of the major actors in Afghanistan since they possess considerable wealth to be able to recruit disgruntled elements from the various sides in the conflict.

Taliban have been around in Afghanistan since the 1990s and even before in the form of mujahideen who fought against the Soviets but ISIS is a new entrant eyed with suspicion, and considered as alien as any foreign invader by ordinary people. Afghans, who are known for their intolerance against any

kind of alien rule, would not surrender their unique tribal traditions and religion to ISIS's barbarians. Even during the period when Osama bin Laden was given refuge in Afghanistan while Mullah Omar was Emir-ul-Momineen, many Afghans resented the presence of Arabs among their ranks. They would prefer to fight and die serving their own leaders rather than ISIS who are controlled by leaders sitting in a remote corner in Iraq or Syria, whose ideology and doctrine is alien to their own objectives and motives. The Taliban on the other hand have extensive sources of income, property, and businesses (some of which are located in Pakistan), and are strongly entrenched in the Afghan society. Their ideological and tribal roots are among the common people and they would not give up their positions to outsiders. Furthermore, the Taliban fighters have sworn their allegiance to Mullah Akhtar Mansour as their Emir like they did to Mullah Omar formerly so they cannot swear loyalty to two leaders if they also pledge allegiance to Abu Bakar Al-Baghdadi.

Most important is the fact that the Afghan Taliban are not global jihadists and their struggle is limited to the borders of Afghanistan. This comparatively limited ambition makes them open to reconciliation and talks. On the other hand, it would be unimaginable to reconcile with a global jihadist. All these facts coupled with ISIS's atrocities in the parts of Nangarhar province where it has gained ground would not endear it to the Afghan people. Taliban, on the other hand, are deeply rooted in the Afghan society and struggling to fight foreign invaders long before the arrival of ISIS on the scene. The only scenario where ISIS might be able to establish its brutal reign could evolve if the Kabul government disappeared and Taliban also lost all the support they enjoyed among the Afghan people, both of which seem highly unlikely. But if such an unimaginable happens then the Afghans would only have the international community to blame for the savagery imposed on them in the form of ISIS. Nevertheless, the appearance of ISIS on the Afghan soil has endangered the life of ordinary Afghans by adding yet another actor in a complicated scene and making impossible any chances of peace in a country suffering from the ravages of decades of war.

Although ISIS may be in its embryonic state, it has the ability to evolve into a monster that would not only be a major threat for any peace efforts in Afghanistan but also the security of Pakistan. Since militants are already on the run from the tribal areas of Pakistan and the region is being thoroughly cleansed by the Pakistan Army, these efforts by the armed forces need to be reinforced in a consolidated manner by civilian institutions in the country so that the seeds of extremism are reduced to a minimum. Extremists may be terminated by the use of force but extremism can only be eradicated by eliminating ignorance. As already discussed, groups like ISIS breed as well as exploit ignorance, illiteracy, and abject poverty, therefore, Pakistan should encourage well-educated religious scholars to present the true image of Islam. For this, the state should strictly control funding of religious institutions by foreign donors (including all Muslim countries) in order to eliminate the import of religious philosophies from abroad. Pakistan is fortunate to possess the legacy of religious philosophers like Dr. Muhammad Iqbal who interpreted the essence of Islamic teachings in the

modern era. This would prove as the only precaution from an enemy who attacks religious beliefs. By raising public awareness regarding religious matters, any ideology may be shunned which is intrinsically contrary to Islamic teachings.

As far as Afghanistan is concerned, there should be concerted efforts by all its neighbours to strive for a peaceful solution to the decades of war. The neighbours need to refrain from exploiting Afghans for their own vested interests like the TTP has been used by India for its own schemes. India should also realize that the development of transnational extremist groups like ISIS would not be in its interest in the future. If the US deems it feasible to withdraw its presence entirely in the near future, as some of the researchers are advising on the basis of opportunity cost,⁵⁷ ISIS could have a clear field. In such an eventuality, ISIS would not only gain in strength, as it has in other parts of the Middle East, but the scenario would get bloodier than it was in the 1990s after the withdrawal of Soviet troops. Thus it is essential to attain a strong central government which has its jurisdiction over the entire Afghan territory. In this context peace talks between the Afghan Taliban and Kabul government may carry the logical solution to the unending war in the country. Further damages to the peace process would jeopardize chances of long-term stability in the region. The US is already thinking along the lines of two possible solutions: First is to keep the Afghan state functioning with the financial assistance streaming in for years to come and to strike a settlement with the Taliban which would reduce the cost of security forces for the US as well as the perceived threats from the region. The second one is more difficult but it aims for Afghanistan to achieve a self-sustainable status by striving towards a peaceful and supportive relationship with its neighbours Pakistan and Iran. This solution or model would only be feasible if Afghanistan utilizes its enormous reserves of minerals, but any foreign investment cannot take place in an atmosphere of lawlessness and instability.⁵⁸

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