Footprints of ISIS in South Asia – A Challenge to Regional Peace and Stability

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ABSTRACT

The presence of ISIS in South Asia remains a matter of debate and concern for both the statesmen and civil society at large. It's physical, virtual, social, and magnitude of influence is at times totally rejected or overblown by the certain section of intelligentsia and policy makers. So far, South Asian states have failed to voice a singular recognition and express desire for regional collective response to this dangerous trend. The paper looks into the patterns of ISIS presence in major South Asian states and analyze the policy response for academic clarity and discussion respectively. Parallel to this, how regional collective response can be harnessed following traditional tools of diplomacy and dialogue is also highlighted.

Key Words: **ISIS, South Asia, Islamic Caliphate, Peace, Security**

Introduction

ISIS is widely known for the destruction of heritages and more importantly for its mass-scale human rights violation like beheadings, war crimes and ethnic cleansing on a "historic scale" in Northern Iraq (Friis, 2015). Declared as a terrorist organisation by the United Nations. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), also identified as Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL), is Jihadist militant group formulated along the lines of Wahhabi school of thought (rigid version of Islam). It aims to establish Islamic Caliphate based on their fundamental methodology (Hamid, 2016). The ISIS started establishing their territory by initially capturing Mosul, Fallujah and Tikrit in Northern-Iraq. However, as ISIS gained strength they have started expanding their network in 18 countries, which includes Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, Egypt, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Mali, Philippines and Somalia. The rapid rise of IS in Iraq and Syria threatens peace and security of not only the regional countries but also the global peace and security. The ISIS mandate is to take control and establish a global caliphate over the territories that were once under the Muslim empire, hence, their agenda is not constricted to Syria and Iraq, which is a source of concern to the global security. After the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the epicenter of international terrorism started to shift from Afghanistan towards Iraq. International terrorism was at its peak after the 2011 Syrian uprising. However, after the intensification of the operations against the ISIS in Syria and Iraq, IS network has

gradually spiraled out of its heartland, and has gained strength and influence in Afghanistan and Pakistan and neighboring countries.

The paper argues that one can locate ISIS pheromone from a constructivist approach of the international relations. Constructivist lens is employed to understand the process of dissection, dismantling and disrupting of the ISIS ideological rooting in the region. Unfortunately, both Pakistan and Afghanistan share elements of poverty (although more in Afghanistan) and religious extremism. The common man to date is confused on the critical placing of ISIS or terrorist religious networks standing in the eyes of Islam. And militant organizations such as these exploit on such vulnerabilities through social media networks, traditional contacts and so on.

The spill-over and the growing influence of ISIS can have consequences for Pakistan and other regional countries. It has been widely debated that in order to establish their support base the ISIS will form alliances with the likeminded militant organizations in Pakistan. However, it must be noted that establishing IS network in Pakistan cannot be easily accomplished. The Pakistani military since 2002 has carried out numerous operations against the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Al-Qaeda, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), and various other terrorist groups (Abdullah, 2014). Due to the large-scale success of these operations these militant groups now primarily operate from Afghanistan. Thus, to establish their foothold in the region the ISIS will need to tactfully get the support of this organization through monetary means, planning, propaganda, and on-ground tactical help.

ISIS: myth or reality in South Asia

With the prominence of ISIS in South Asia a critical question arises: whether the Islamic State (IS) poses a threat to the region or not? Some security analysts and policymakers believe that given the global propaganda of the ISIS amongst the jihadist groups, in addition to the grip of their ideology within disillusioned and radicalized youth, the ISIS postulates a forceful security threat to South Asia. While on the other hand, it is widely argued that the cultural issues such as language, norms and geographical distance will hamper the ISIS attempts to establish a support base in South Asian countries. However, very few study the presence of ISIS in South Asia in-between these two extreme interpretations of the ISIS footprint in South Asia. The paper argues that IS existence in South Asian landscape is neither a myth nor an obvious happening – in fact it is a ground reality or a fact (a grey area in between white and black) and should be approached from the alarmist perspective while formulating a regional counter-terrorism policy in the present and the future stage.

However, myths regarding the presence of the IS in South Asia merely as media hype have been widely dispelled, ISIS-inspired assaults in Dhaka, Quetta and Kabul, in addition to the growing number of radicalized youth travelling from
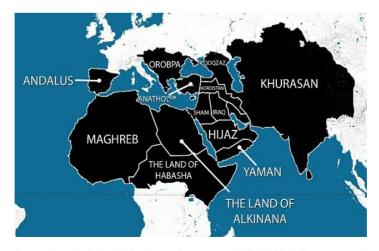
India, Pakistan and Maldives to Syria and Iraq.(Manik, Anand, and Barry, 2016) (Express Exclusive, 2016) These attacks exhibit a high level of planning and sophistication, showcasing the growing influence of IS. Within a short span of time ISIS has established a large group of sympathizers in the region, confirming the growing foothold of the ISIS in South Asia and the emergence of a tangible regional security threat.

Although, ISIS came into being with the mandate of establishing a pretentious caliphate-building group, however, ISIS has gradually transformed its strategy to a global terrorist organisation. Making all of the poorly governed regions including Afghanistan and Pakistan as easy targets for the ISIS. The appeal and influence of the ISIS to a segment of the South Asian population is gradually increasing (Comerford, 2017). As a part of ISIS decentralization strategy, they are gradually expanding their network in Pakistan and Afghanistan and have seeded a nucleus in the region. Despite successful military operations in Iraq and Syria, it can now be widely argued that the ISIS will grow in size, power and influence in the South Asian region.

A critical point to be registered here is, for a terrorist group to function and operationalize it needs an ungoverned territory (safe havens), social asylum and the demographic sanctuary (vulnerable and marginalized youth). Thus, the poor governance and weak policing in Afghanistan and Pakistan, especially along the porous Pak-Afghan border can provide a safe haven to the Islamic State to function and gain a foothold. Moreover, the lack of trust between the regional states, double gaming and self-denials, has further fostered and aided ISIS determinations to increase its presence in South Asia.

At this instance the analysis must clarify the significance of the very concept of "Khorasan Province" as visualized by the ISIS operatives – a very dangerous signaling for the South Asia as well.

Khorasan Province

Source https://afghanhindsight.wordpress.com/2015/03/05/isis-five-year-plan/

The ISIS profound interest in South Asia is rooted in its ideological belief of re-establishing the "Khorasan" province an ancient religious name of Central Asia, Afghanistan and northern Pakistan. It has been discovered that the ISIS has a special branch called Khorasan Province which is based in South Asia. This branch is mainly active in Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, it has now spread towards different states including India, Bangladesh and Indonesia where people are willing to pledge their allegiance to them. The group was formed in January 2015, by the ISIS and the former Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan militant Hafiz Saeed Khan was appointed as its leader, along with the appointment of a former Afghan Taliban commander Abdul Rauf Aliza as deputy leader (Staff, 2015). The official pledge of allegiance was announced by ISIS official spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani on 26th January 2015 via an audio statement. His statement validated ISIS intentions of the establishment of caliphate in Afghanistan and Pakistan-historically known as the Khurasan Province (Panda, 2015). Following the announcement, ISIL began actively recruiting militants from various militant groups and the Taliban. However, Hafiz Saeed Khan and Aliza were killed in a U.S. drone strike in August 2016 and February 2015 consecutively (Afghanistan drone strike, 2015). The current militant group leaders are unknown (US confirms, 2016).

In 2014, when ISIS broadcasted its global Islamic caliphate ideology in Levant and Iraq it rapidly rose to international prominence, and their propaganda literature was also distributed in some parts of Pakistan. 'Fatah' a booklet supporting the ISIS propaganda was circulated in Peshawar and FATA. In addition to that, graffiti in support of ISIS caliphate ideology was also reported in major cities of Pakistan. It has been reported that the Balochistan's provincial government in 2014 warned the federal government and law enforcement agencies regarding the increasing footprints of IS by publishing a confidential report. The highly confidential report confirmed the increasing support base of the ISIS and claimed that the ISIS has recruited approximately 10000-12000 supporters from Kurram Agency and Hangu. Although the presence of ISIS is still debatable in Pakistan, but one cannot deny the growing influence of the ISIS in the region. Moreover, it has been confirmed by the official authorities that several terrorist organisations in Pakistan have vowed their allegiance to ISIS-linked terrorists. For a country like Pakistan that is thwarted in 'War on Terror' for more than a decade now, the presence of ISIS factions and supporters is definitely worrying and a cause of concern.

In conjunction to all of the facts, the government authorities have recently stated that the support base of ISIS is gradually increasing and there are IS supported factions in Pakistan, making the ISIS is an imminent threat to Pakistan's national security. The director general of the Intelligence Bureau Aftab Sultan, has stated to the Senate Standing Committee on Interior, confirming the increasing threat of IS. He stated "Islamic State group was emerging as a threat in the country because several militant groups had soft corner for it" (Khan, 2016).

Moreover, the ISIS has reportedly carried out various attacks across Pakistan, in spite of the implementation of the National Action Plan (NAP) (20 points, n.d.). It must be highlighted despite ISIS attempts to destabilize Pakistan's security the authorities have reportedly success in countering the challenge of ISIS. The ISIS Pakistan leader Yousaf al-Salafi was captured and arrested in early 2015 by the security forces (Reuters, 2015). Similarly, another successful operation was carried out by the Pakistani security forces and the perpetrators behind the attack on the Ismaili community in Karachi were reported to be linked with the IS (Police, 2016). Likewise, it has been reported in another incident, in December 2015, that the Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) cracked IS supported groups from Sailkot, a Punjab's district. (Chaudhry, 2015).

In conjunction to these arrests, Zarb-e-Azb a large-scale national military operation, is already being carried out in the tribal areas to eradicate terrorism and radicalization in Pakistan. Despite various military operations, and intelligence-based operations terrorist attacks are still prevalent in Pakistan, especially in Balochistan and tribal areas making it essential to mull over Pakistan's counterterrorism strategies.

It has been widely debated that the government of Pakistan has not implemented the National Action Plan with full commitment. Besides the significant success of the Zarb-e-Azb operation, NAP has not yet fully achieved its objectives. Civil society, media, opposition parties and academia are among the main critics of the poor implementation and slow pace of NAP.

Pakistan's Initiative to overcome the threat of ISIS

After the 9/11 attack, Pakistan has been deeply involved in the fight against terrorism and extremism on a large scale. "The Operation Zarb-e-Azb, launched by Pakistan Armed Forces in 2014, is the largest extensive military maneuvering against the terrorism in the world in recent times" (Ghazanfar, 2016).

The Pakistani government has been repeatedly criticized by some regional and international actors for focusing only on short-term tangible gains. By critically analyzing the contemporary strategies adopted by the Pakistani government to tackle terrorism it can be safely concluded that the state needs to adopt a more proactive approach while addressing the rising threat of ISIS. Keeping in mind the rising threat of ISIS in Pakistan, it is highly recommended that the Pakistani government should focus on long-term goals and alter its policies to eradicate terrorism. Military actions are not a cure-all. Hence, it is essential to modify Pakistan's internal and regional counterterrorism policies.

ISIS in Afghanistan

As discussed in the previous section, some parts of Afghanistan also come in the 'khorasan' province as advocated by the ISIS. The pressing point here is that throughout history Afghanistan has been plagued with wars, weak governance

coupled with feeble security forces, and insurgencies. In addition to that, ethnic divisions in Afghanistan have further complicated the functioning of the country. In consideration of all these factors, Afghanistan can demonstrate to be an ideal safe haven for the ISIS militants to establish their operations and control centre. Afghanistan being a weak government nation can provide the ISIS physical space and on-ground bases to operationalize. Hence, the power vacuum and the weakly administered remote areas can prove to be a grave threat to not only Afghanistan's peace and security, but also for the entire South Asian region.

Looking from a broader context, the recent operation carried out by the US have greatly degraded the IS capabilities. It has been reported that thousands of the ISIS fighters have been killed by the USA led airstrikes (Liptak, 2016). Hence, the ISIS is exploring new safe havens and recruits who can work both ways in South Asia and the Middle East and enfolding the option of the Khorasan province as well. These developments are looked critically by the US military and the international community at large. Here the question arises what options Islamabad and Kabul will have in their strategic postures in the forcible future. Recently, the Afghan President has cautioned the US regarding the growing presence of the ISIS in Afghanistan.

The operations against the ISIS have strengthened and the militant organization has suffered setbacks in Syria and Iraq, this has made them to look for new safe havens to function, thus they appear to be gaining foothold in Afghanistan. It has been reported that the ISIS has taken advantage of power vacuum and weak policing in Afghanistan's northeastern border. According to reports the locals have stated that they were attracted to the ISIS because it has proved to be better for them in terms of monetary gains than the Afghan government.

However, one cannot assertively state that it is going to be easy for the ISIS to create their support base in Afghanistan. The ISIS broadly faces challenges from three key parties or groups. Firstly, the US-led coalition poses a great challenge to the functioning of ISIS in Afghanistan. The US is currently sending large amount of troops in Iraq and Syria, and is going to be great hurdle for IS to acquire physical space in Afghanistan. The Afghan national security forces is the second challenge to IS. Most importantly, the Afghan Taliban poses the biggest challenge to IS. Afghan Taliban holds great strength and position in their home country, hence they would never allow any militant organization to destabilize them or replace their authority in Afghanistan.

Moreover, various clashes have been reported between the IS militants and Taliban. For instance, in Farah province the ISIS recruited around 600 people. However, the Afghan Taliban managed to besiege the camp and defeat the ISIS (Goldstein, 2015). The IS militants were later banished from the province.

There are also reports that the IS militants tried to establish their support base in a village of Manan Bagh, due to its close proximity with the Pak-Afghan border. In order to establish their foothold the ISIS militants started sidelining the

community leaders, however, they received little or no support. However it must be noted that the ISIS still maintains a stronghold in eastern Afghanistan and they maybe a threat to the civilians (Rasmussen, 2016).

Conclusion

One can conclude from the overleaf discussion that international terrorist networks like ISIS have mind and means to exploit the social weaknesses that exists at the local, national and regional levels. Thus, providing inroads into the psychological makeup of the some strata of the society. The danger is, if such nodes gets connected the national security will be challenged to some extent too. Political instability in Afghanistan presents itself as an ideal opportunity for the ISIS to exploit – making it a safe haven to materialize, functionalize and expand their operations for their larger goal of establishing a global caliphate.

Pakistan enjoys strong military forces making it difficult for the ISIS to take control. The Pakistani military has successfully carried out operations against Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan and TTP linked terrorist groups in tribal areas making it a difficult task for the IS to establish a safe haven in FATA or in any other region of Pakistan. However, it must be highlighted that there are many sleeper cells present which are showing allegiance to ISIS.

Whereas, Afghanistan can be a potential soft target for the IS as compared to Pakistan due to the lack of firm control of the Afghan government. However, the ISIS can encounter challenges from the Afghan Taliban making it difficult to gain foothold in the Taliban-controlled areas.

Ina nut shell, aforementioned discussion of the growing imprint if the ISIS specifically in Pakistan and Afghanistan also holds true for the other South Asian states namely: India, Bangladesh, Maldives and so on. The region as a whole has the imperatives to be used as a recruitment ground, staging terror attacks, providing sanctuaries, being used as transit to other regions and states – all this posing serious and critical threat to the South Asian regional peace and stability. This in turns presents itself as a creative challenge to the traditional and non-traditional tools of diplomacy and regional/bilateral interactions trends.

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