

## **Wilayah Khorasan and Its Regional Implications**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper provides a comprehensive account of Islamic State's presence in its self-proclaimed Wilayah Khorasan over the territories of Afghanistan and Pakistan. It further examines the competing Jihadi groups; Al-Qaeda, Afghan Taliban and Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK), that exist and challenge each other in South Asia. This paper analyzes the responses of local jihadi groups towards or against the rise of ISK by illustrating the key factors which determines why and how any group cooperates with the other. Based on the activities, strength and progress of Wilayah Khorasan in Afghanistan and Pakistan, this study highlights the potential threat that it currently poses to these states and to the regional stability in future and suggests practical recommendations in order to counter this emerging challenge.

**Keywords:** *Wilayah Khorasan, Islamic State, Afghanistan, Pakistan*

### **Introduction**

Islamic State (IS) marked the initiation of its expansionist ambitions by the establishment of *wilayahs* over various regions of the world. The pledge of allegiance from different groups are accepted periodically and announced officially by IS.

On 10<sup>th</sup> January 2015, Hafiz Saeed Khan and his followers pledged their allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. It was responded a few weeks later by ISIS's official spokesperson, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, in a seven-minute-long speech. He announced the expansion of Islamic State in Khorasan region by establishing "Wilayah Khorasan." He declared Hafiz Saeed Khan as the governor or Wali and Abdul Rauf Khadim as a deputy governor of new wilayah. The areas this wilayah mainly focused were Afghanistan, Western part of Pakistan and areas of the Central Asian region (Sheikh, 2016).

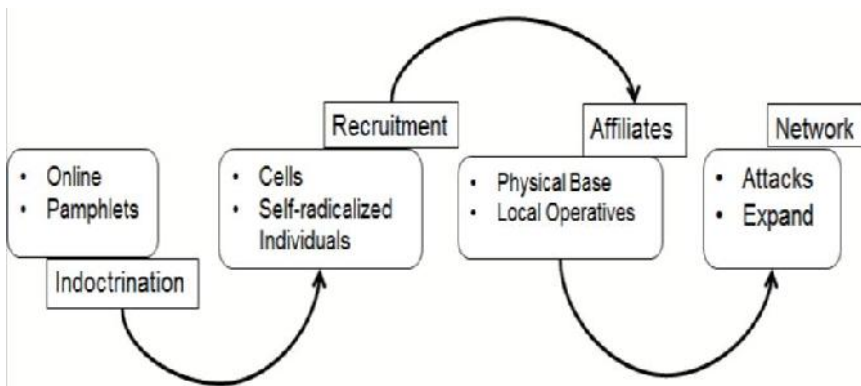
### Prime Factors

The primary factors that are important to understand the eastward expansion are:

1. *Ideological Factor:* The religious significance of the “Khorasan” region which is mentioned in several Hadiths in context of “black banners” became a major ideological factor for IS to expand eastward.
2. *Social Factor:* The incubation of various Jihadi networks, primarily in Afghan-Pak region, highlights the significance of the region for ISIS in their agenda of global Jihad.
3. *Political Factors:* Islamic State is challenging Al-Qaeda’s franchises around the world in their fight to establish Caliphate. It is an important factor that brought IS to the home ground of Al-Qaeda in Khorasan (Basit, 2015).

### Four-Pronged strategy for South Asia

**Figure 1** Four-Pronged strategy of IS towards South Asia



*Source: Rajaratnam School of International Studies*

Cyberspace remained an effective platform for IS activities, mainly Twitter and Facebook. It has used these platforms by engaging with general public and propagating their ideology over there. Through the distribution of pamphlets and wall chalking both in Afghanistan and later in areas of Pakistan, the group signaled its entry in the area. In early January 2015, Mullah Rauf Khadim, former deputy governor of Wilayah Khorasan, set up an IS cell in Helmand province and recruited upto a few hundred fighters from Kajaki district along with some adjacent districts including Musa Qala, Nawzad and Baghran, and the tribal areas of Pakistan (Osman 2016). It is hard to say anything firm about the nature, structure, and future of this movement but on the basis of news reports and stories, its progress can be analyzed so that the future of the group is projected accordingly.

**Physical Presence in Khorasan**

**Afghanistan**

Afghanistan is a fragile economy with weak security forces and an active insurgency due to which it can give IS the space to escalate. The weak government of Afghanistan, large swaths of lawless and undeveloped remote areas has been the key factors for the physical growth of this group in the various parts of the country.

Islamic State in Khorasan (ISK) has its base camps in Nangarhar, Helmand, Kunar, Farah, Kunduz and Faryab province which is used for the purpose of recruitment and training of fighters. ISK has furthered their presence in nine or reportedly 11 provinces including Samangan, Sar-e-Pul and Logar with close access to Afghan capital, Kabul. It is believed that ISK has the support of Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), and the fractured Taliban ethnic groups in Afghanistan (McFate, Denaburg & Forrest, 2015).

According to General John Nicholson, commander of Operation Resolute Support and U.S. Forces-Afghanistan, ISKP has dropped from a peak of between 2,000-3,000 fighters in 2016, to around 1,100 fighters in 2018, with between 600-800 militants based in Nangarhar province and an additional 300 in Kunar and Jowzjan provinces combined (Seftel, 2018). Nangarhar province became an attractive spot of ISK because of relatively less Taliban influence and it is inhabited by Hizb-e-Islami Gulbadin, Haqqani Network and cross border militant factions.

Initially, Islamic State named Abdul Rahem Muslim Dost as a first emir of its Khorasan Chapter in 2014. He successfully defected numerous TTP leaders to IS and meanwhile focused on the recruitment of Salafi Jihadist in eastern Afghanistan's province, Kunar. Islamic State officially marked its presence in Afghanistan by attacking a Kabul Bank in the provincial capital of Jalalabad region of Nangarhar province on 18<sup>th</sup> April, 2015. It killed 25 civilians and injured almost 125. Soon after marking its entry in Afghanistan, Islamic State fighters made active advances and reportedly initiated recruitment of thousands of fighters in 70% of Afghanistan (Byrne, Karyzaniak & Khan, 2015).

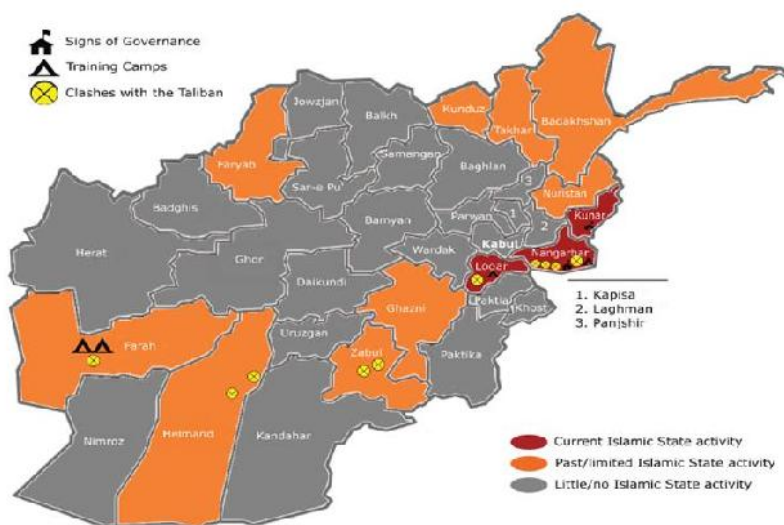
With the appointment of Hafiz Seed Khan as a new Emir the IS Khorasan leadership undergone a major change and it started settling down the foreign fighters in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Almost 200 fighters were reportedly settled in January 2015 in Southern Afghanistan, including Paktika and Ghazni province. These foreign fighters created lesion with TTP of Pakistan and IMU from Central Asia (McNally, Amiral & Weinbaum, 2016).

ISK met great lose of leadership with the death of deputy governor Mullah Rauf Khadim and later the governor, Hafiz Saeed Khan in July, 2016. There were limited ISK related activities in the start due to weak leadership but after the death of Mullah Omar in July 2015 their activities started to increase at a higher speed. It shows a clear weakness in Taliban ranks after Mullah Omer as well as a smart move from IS-Khorasan force to fill the power vacuum that was created.

The group has made its presence felt by taking the responsibilities for several suicide attacks, kidnappings, and armed operations mainly in the South-Eastern

Afghanistan. They have successfully acquired areas in the North-Eastern parts and are trying to occupy certain areas in the South-Eastern Afghanistan (McNally, Amiral & Weinbaum, 2016).

**Figure 2** Summary of Islamic State activities 2014-16



**Source:** Middle East Institute Policy focus 2011-16

United States launched airstrikes against ISK targets in Afghanistan throughout the year 2016 and in the initial months of 2017. Afghan National Force has a limited ability to counter the threats posed by Islamic State but still it has launched multiple operations to limit the escalation of ISK. Operation codenamed as *Hamza* was launched in early days of April, 2017 and resulted in great loss to ISK. ISK lost hold on the areas of Kot district and even operated in Mamand valley. Mamand Valley is an immensely important strategic location for Islamic State as it has a mountainous terrain and provides a suitable hideout for the top leadership and also to hold the prisoners there. On 14<sup>th</sup> April this year, United States dropped its biggest non-Nuclear bomb “Massive Ordinance Air Blast Bomb” (MOAB) also known as “Mother of All Bombs” on Achin District of Nangarhar province in Afghanistan considering its strategic significance for the group. Asadkhel area of Achin district where the bomb was dropped was at the entrance of Mamand Valley.

## Pakistan

Pakistan is the second major target of Islamic State in establishing its strong Wilayah in Khorasan region. The Emir or head of Wilayah Khorasan, Hafiz Saeed Khan, was himself an important leader of TTP. Initially, the core leadership of Wilayah Khorasan includes twelve members, nine from Pakistan, two Afghans and one from unknown origin (Tariq, 2016).

ISK marked its entry to Pakistan by its effective propaganda techniques. It used wall graffiti and distributed pamphlets in various important cities of Pakistan in order to alert the public and agencies of their presence in the country. The process

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started in 2014 in the cities including Lahore, Karachi, Peshawar, Rawalpindi and Bannu. It was immediately responded by the security agencies and they captured as many as 309 suspected militants associated with IS by 2016, as informed by military sources. It was followed by the response of various militant groups like Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, Lal Masjid, Tehreek-e-Khilafat, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and splinter groups of TTP like Jandullah and Shahid-ullah Shahid group, who defected to ISK in varying degrees (Syed, 2016).

Prominent commanders who disassociated themselves from TTP and joined Islamic State were Hafiz Quran Daulat, Gul Zaman, Mufti Hassan, Saad Emirati, Ubaidah al-Peshwari, Sheikh Muhsin, Talha, Omar al-Mansur, from Pakistan's infamous Red Mosque, and Khalid Mansoor. They were assigned to control the area of central FATA which is a strategic block that stretches from Peshawar to the Khyber Pass. In Pakistan it has gained support from tribal areas of Pakistan, mainly from FATA (Osman, 2015).

Zarb-e-Azb operation launched against TTP militants by Pakistan Army in 2014 has caused severe setback to TTP network across the country and now it has lost its control from FATA and other areas once under TTP control. A huge influx of TTP has been observed in Afghanistan through porous border between two states and has joined ISK in great numbers.

The total number of militants affiliated with Wilayah Khorasan is uncertain but according to Royal United Services Institute Report of 2016, the number is estimated between 2000-3000 in Pakistan. Unlike other terrorist outfits already active in Pakistan, the recruitment of IS related militants are reportedly highest in urban areas. In 2016, two dozen of students were found affiliated with ISIS in Karachi. Nearly 300 people have migrated from Pakistan to Syria in order to join ISIS (McNally & Weinbaum, 2016).

Pakistan Army is actively engaged in countering the internally posed threats by ISK and similar groups present in different forms. After the success of Operation Zarb-e-Azb a new operation, "Operation Radd-ul-Fassad" has been launched under the new military commander in Chief, which aims at eradicating the terrorists by all means. Daily based operations are launched and hundreds of militants have so far been arrested who were allegedly involved in terrorist activities.

### **India**

India is an important target of many jihadi groups on the base of various interpretations of prophetic sayings. IS too considers it an important target in future and aims at extending its Wilayah in India as well.

The group has its support base in India. Kiren Rijju, Minister of Home Affairs of India, have admitted to the presence in of IS in the southern part of the country. It is estimated that around 7000-8000 youth is radicalized by IS in India. Reportedly, Abu Salman al-Hindi, an ISIS commander of Indian origin, along with another terrorist group "Indian Mujahedeen" (IM), has allegedly trained around twelve groups to join IS (Bonesh, 2016).

## **Central Asia**

Central Asian region too is vulnerable to fall in ISIS propaganda. The support of IMU and ETIM to Caliphate is alarming. But, ISIS has not yet responded to their pledge of allegiance and has not tasked them with any wilayah or province. Also, the Russian and China's involvement in Central Asia will provide a security umbrella to the region (Dyner, Legiec & Rekawek, 2015).

Overall security condition in South Asia is comparatively stable, have a strong standing military and a sound economic system it is, therefore, a challenge for ISIS to achieve its goals in the region. The complex jihadi ideologies in South Asia are both a challenge and an opportunity for the group to penetrate in the region.

### **Jihadi models in South Asia**

South Asia is home to major jihadi groups operating worldwide and due to major differences in their aims, ideologies, agendas, theological base and strategies they opt, three distinct models of Jihad seems to appear sharing similarities as well as clear distinctions.

1. Al-Qaeda- Ghazwa e Hind
2. Emirate- Afghan Taliban
3. Caliphate- Islamic State

### **Al-Qaeda- Ghazwa e Hind**

Al-Qaeda was established in 1988 by Osama bin Laden with an aim to bring together mujahedeen to fight a new jihad against West. Al-Qaeda's basic ideology was "pan-Islam." Its ultimate agenda was to work with allied Islamic extremist groups, overthrowing the un-Islamic regimes by expelling non-Muslims and Westerners from Muslim countries. In pursuit of these goals, it expanded its network by creating lesions with other Islamist groups in the world (Gunaratna, 2005).

One such target was to fight US in Afghanistan. The theological base of establishing its network and franchise in this region was with relevance to the concept of "Ghazwa-e-Hind." This refers to an apocalyptic war which is mentioned in the prophecies narrated by Holy Prophet (PBUH) in several Hadiths according to which India will be conquered by a jihadi army and all the soldiers of this army are guaranteed a place in heaven.

Hazrat Abu Hurairah (R.A) narrated the Hadith, "Definitely, one of your troops would do a war with Hindustan (ghazwa-e-hind) and Allah would grant success to those warriors, as far as they would bring their kings by dragging them in chains. And Allah would forgive those warriors (by the Blessing of this great war). And when those Muslims would return, they would find Hazrat Isa Ibn-e-Maryam (A.S.) in Syria (Shaam)".

After disowning ISIS, the splinter group of al-Qaeda, a phase of open rivalry has begun between the two. In order to take a lead on "Ghazwa-e-Hind", Al-Qaeda formed a Khorasan group which according to U.S. officials is "a cadre of experienced al-Qaeda operatives dispatched to Syria by Ayman-al-Zawahiri to organize terror attacks against Western targets". Attacking India as "near enemy"

target and US as a “far enemy” in Syria are both in line with their interpretation of the prophetic Hadith and becomes the ideology of this group (Joscelyn, 2015).

### **Emirate- Afghan Taliban**

Taliban officially emerged as a separate entity in 1994 but has their roots among the “mujahedeen” who fought Soviet army in 1979. In September 1994, Mullah Mohammad Omar with just 50 students supporting his campaign to implement the actual Islamic code in Afghanistan formed the group “Taliban.” Within months, it gained mass support and financial strength from both, Afghanistan and Pakistan. On November 3, 1994, the Taliban took control of Kandahar City and started stamping out corruption, curbed lawlessness and made roads and ensured safety for commerce in their areas of influence. By February, 1995, they took control of 12 provinces and grew in number to 25,000 fighters. In 1996, Taliban seized Kabul and finally established the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.” Mullah Omar, as the head of state, imposed strict Shariah law. Taliban used conventional and unconventional warfare techniques for achieving their goal of establishing the Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan (Linschoten, Strick & Kuehn, 2011).

By 1998, Taliban successfully gained control over 90 percent of Afghanistan. Due to human rights violations against women and other citizens, drug trafficking, and refusal to surrender Osama Bin Laden and other internationally wanted criminals, their government was declared an international pariah state. Only Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates recognized the government until 2001 (Giustozzi, 2008).

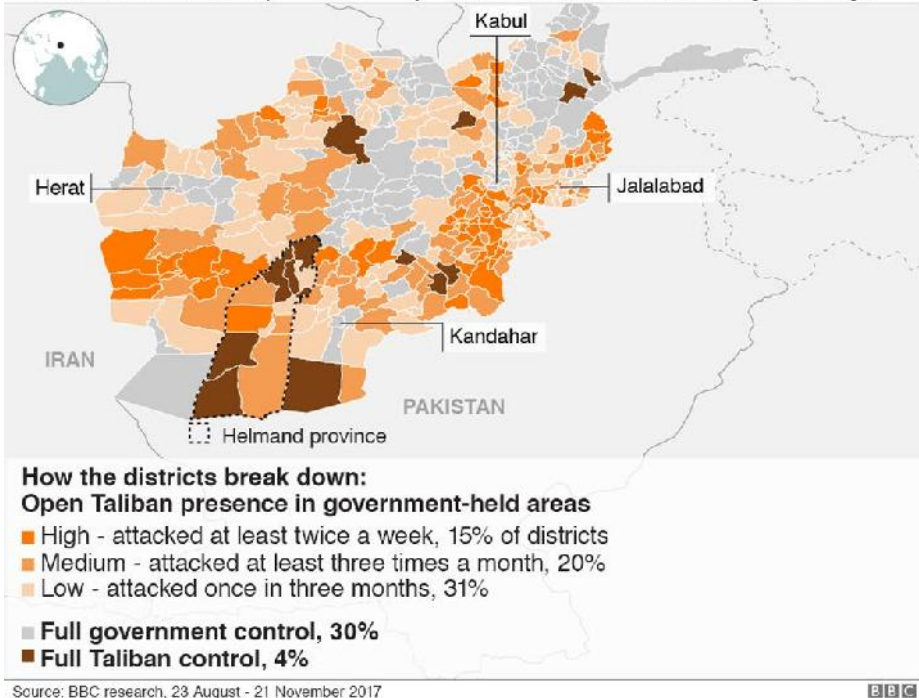
The main goal of the Taliban was to establish an Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan by implementing Sharia laws. Its ideology, however, is to shift from the traditional Islamist views which were held by anti-Soviet Mujahedeen fighters in the 1980s and early 1990s to a combination of strict anti-modern Pashtun tribal ideology which is mixed with radicalized Deobandi interpretations of Islam. Jihadist and pan-Islamist views of Osama Bin Laden also penetrated the ideological base of the Taliban government. The Taliban has an ideological commitment to a strict interpretation and enforcement of Shariah law. Their rhetoric asserts that they are engaged in a “righteous jihad” which is aiming at establishing a divinely ordered Islamic system in Afghanistan in the form of “Islamic Emirate.” It retained a narrow social base, and power was concentrated in the hands of mullahs from the Kandahari Pashtun tribes. They asserted to the divine right which was vested in their Emirate by the negation of pluralism and by the rejection of a popular mandate (Sampele, 2014).

The executive leadership is known as the Quetta Shura Taliban (QST). Core leadership of Taliban is estimated to be between 200-1,000 individuals, the estimates of active members in Taliban range more than 35,000 (2010). By 2006, Al-Jazeera reported 7,000 whereas UN Security Council found them between 4000-5000. In 2008, the members were estimated around 10,000 and but during 2009 the number increased to 25,000. Richard Barrons, US Major General confirmed the members to be around 36,000. However, the number declined to 25,000 by mid-February 2016 (Foreign Policy Magazine). The Taliban has physical presence in southern provinces of Helmand, Zabul, and Kandahar which make up the area of Taliban operations in Afghanistan (McNally & Amiral, 2016).

**Figure 3: Taliban presence in Afghanistan**

### Taliban presence in Afghanistan by district

Labelled cities have also experienced deadly suicide attacks, car bombs and targeted killings



**Source:** BBC Mews (Sharifi & Adamou, 2018)

After being expelled from Sudan in May 1996, Bin Laden and Al Qaeda returned to Afghanistan. When Taliban took control of Jalalabad, Osama Bin Laden was already living there Al Qaeda operatives fell under Taliban’s custody. During 1996, their mutual relationship was often tense. Both the groups had little interaction but later, Mullah Omar and bin Laden developed relationship somehow. Even then they remained two distinct groups on the basis of their agendas, ideologies, and objectives. A shared religious motivation and a shared location kept them relatively close. But 9/11 attacks distanced them apart when Mullah Omar not only refused to apprehend Bin Laden’s for foreign authorities but the Taliban government condemned the attacks as well. Taliban had rarely made any mention of their connection with Al-Qaeda but had sheltered them under their rule from the U.S. However in contrast to Taliban, Al-Qaeda had regularly confirmed its loyalty to the Taliban (Riedel, 2015).

The Taliban leadership has strongly voiced in opposition to the rise of Islamic State (IS) and its entry in Afghanistan. In June 2015 the deputy leader Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor wrote a public letter warning Islamic State to stay out of Afghanistan.

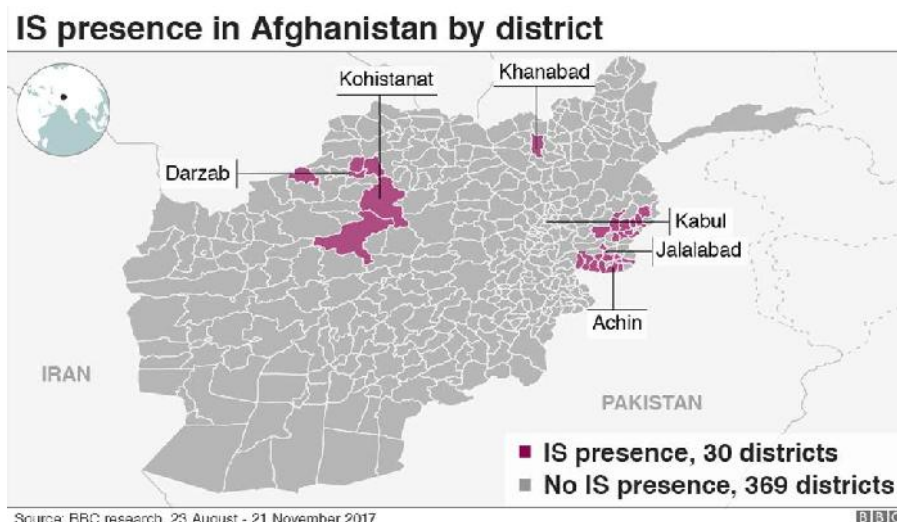


### Caliphate- Islamic State:

The Islamic State of Khorasan was launched in Afghanistan in 2015 when ISIS spokesperson announced groups' expansion in Khorasan region and declared Hafiz Saeed Khan as its governor. Hafiz Saeed Khan is a former member of Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan from the Orakzai Agency in Pakistan. Foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria of both Afghan and Pakistan origin doesn't have great number and therefore doesn't constitute a significant number in Wilayah Khorasan.

Reportedly the number of Islamic State's fighters in Afghanistan has significantly declined as of March 2016 due to US drone strikes and offensives by Taliban and al-Qaeda militias. According to an estimate there are around 2,500 fighters concentrated mainly in Nangarhar Province in the East. But there are chances of IS's escalation in the country due to the rise of sectarian tensions and if the situation persists and the group continues to be well funded both within and outside of Afghanistan then it will be able to leverage "greed and grievance" motives to win recruits (Johnson, Karokhail & Amiri, 2016).

**Figure 4:** *Islamic State presence in Afghanistan*



**Source:** BBC (2018)

Islamic State made its way to this region by responding to baya't offered by different individuals and small groups from the region. ISIS's Afghanistan faction largely constitutes hardliners who split from the Taliban movement and pledged their allegiance to al-Baghdadi. The core leadership, however, contested for the mantle of the legitimacy of Afghan jihad leadership, both militarily and ideologically. These competing claims of legitimacy over leadership are now framed in exclusively religious dynamics (Comerford, 2016).

Islamic State wants to reinstate the lost Abassid caliphate under the leadership of Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi. They want to remove the westerner footprints from the map of the world by redrawing the Skyes Picot map of 1916. The ideology of Islamic State is in line with the ideas floated in the "Management of Savagery" by Abu-Bakr Naji (Pass, 2016). He in this book urged Muslim fighters to commit

such actions that compel the West to declare an open war against them which would be easy to fight and by doing so the western hypocrisy and dual policy would be revealed before the world. For this, the group has proclaimed Caliphate on the territories of Iraq and Syria and keeping a hold of that self-proclaimed state established at the border of both states, it then plans to expand in different part of the world.

This ideology has commonalities with al-Qaeda too but the strategy and execution plan is completely opposite. This is the reason that Islamic State is challenging Al-Qaeda globally. Similar is the case in South Asia where al-Qaeda is deterring IS's influence and it is because of the same reason that in 2014 al-Qaeda launched its new franchise Al-Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) by assimilating almost 16 smaller and larger terrorist groups in the region. This coalition if coordinated well can prove to be a major challenge for Islamic State in Khorasan.

**Table 1**  
*Comparison between Al-Qaeda, Afghan Taliban and ISK*

	<b>Al-Qaeda</b>	<b>Afghan Taliban</b>	<b>Islamic State</b>
<b>Aim</b>	To fight global Jihad against West.	Implement the strict Islamic code in Afghanistan.	To reinstate Abassid caliphate under Al-Baghdadi.
<b>Ideology</b>	Pan-Islam	Shift from traditional Islamist views to strict anti-modern views.	War against the "Shia-Zionist-Crusader alliance."
<b>Strategy for Afghanistan</b>	Fight US forces and ISK by allying with Taliban.	Install strict Sharia code by weakening the government.	Recruiting fighters in ISK ranks by defecting them from Taliban and TTP.
<b>Targets</b>	US forces in Afghanistan and ISK.	US forces, ISK and Kabul government.	Taliban and Al-Qaeda
<b>Area Focus</b>	Operating globally	Afghanistan focused	Operating globally

Islamic State, Al-Qaeda and the Taliban exhibit differing "models" of jihad. Their agenda, strategy, tactics and tools are different but vary in the degree of similarity in their ideology. Islamic State claims to represent Muslim ummah in its global multi-fronted war against the "Shia-Zionist-Crusader alliance." They profess the "Top-Down approach" by declaring "caliphate" first and expanding their influence over other regions. Al-Qaeda, too claims to represent all Muslims and fits in the "Bottom-up approach" when analyzed. It franchises in different regions and make efforts to topple the Non-Muslim regimes and replacing it with Muslim rule. Its later aims are uniting those Islamic regimes under the banner of caliphate which it aims to lead in future. The Taliban, however, focuses at local level, seeking to establish an Islamic Emirate within the borders of Afghanistan and doesn't have any international agenda (Comerford, 2016).

### **Reactions of jihadi groups to the rise of ISIS**

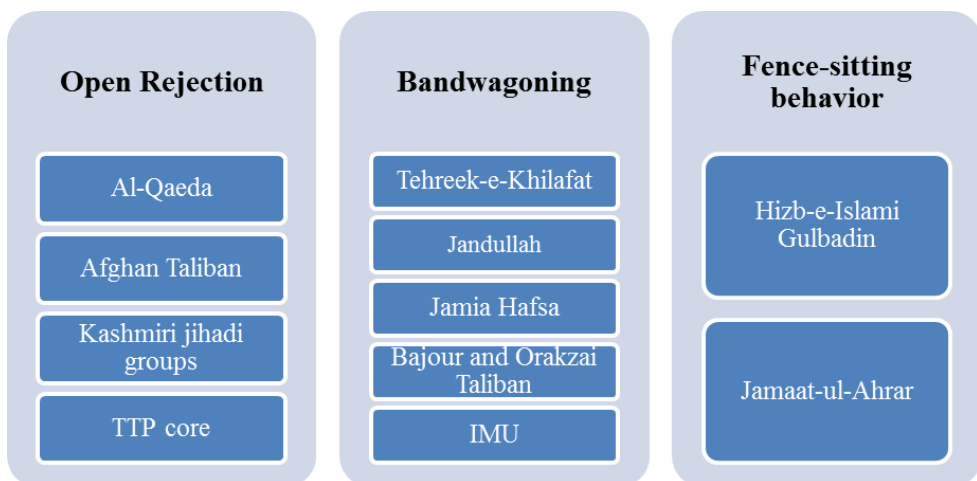
To understand the network of these Jihadi models in the region, it is important to examine the ideologies and level of influence of major jihadi organizations presently operating in Pakistan, Jammu Kashmir, and Afghanistan. Analyzing the ideologies and nature of reactions that local jihadi groups showed towards the rise

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of Islamic State in the region, following three broad reactions are generally observed:

1. Open Rejection
2. Bandwagoning
3. Fence-sitting behavior (Basit, 2015).

**Figure 5** *Three broad reactions to ISK rise*



**Source:** Prepared by the author with the help of literature

### Open Rejection

The rise of Islamic State in this region has raised alarms for other groups who already have strong position in Afghanistan and Pakistan. This emergence has been categorically rejected by those groups whose turf and influence has been challenged. Here is a brief overview of groups who have responded to IS rise with open rejection:

- Al-Qaeda has clearly rejected the entry of Islamic state in the region and has tried to maintain its preponderant position as a vanguard of global jihad by announcing the establishment of Al-Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) to counter ISK.
- Afghan Taliban outgunned and outnumbered ISK and constituted a special task force of around 1,000 fighters to avert defections to ISK in 2015.
- TTP core rebutted IS leader Baghdadi's claim to head a caliphate in 2015 and disowned the commanders and the splinter groups that pledged allegiance to ISK.
- Majority of the Kashmir-oriented jihadist groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Harkat ul Jihad al-Islami (HuJI) and Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM) operate under the umbrella of the "United Jihad Council" (UJC) and have

ties with al-Qaeda. However, Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), another terrorist group that is allegedly involved in terrorist activities in India, is a core faction of the Punjabi Taliban Network. An overall trend in Kashmir based militancy is either pro-al Qaeda or pro-TTP and have openly rejected Islamic State's influence in the region (Malik & Beevor, 2015).

### **Bandwagoning**

Weaker groups align with powerful groups for the purpose of gaining recognition which they lack independently and to share the gains in the spoils they conquer together. Relatively less powerful groups who have sought allegiance to Islamic State's powerful brand are listed below:

- Four splinter groups of the TTP including Jandullah, Tehrik-e-Khilafat, Bajaur and Orakzai region Taliban have pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi (Osman, 2016).
- Afghan Taliban (the Salafi Taliban) and the Uzbek militants of the IMU have pledged allegiance to IS.
- Maulana Abdul Aziz, the leader of Lal Masjid (Red Mosque), and Jamia Hafsa has been an iconic symbol for many jihadist groups of Pakistan and had welcomed ISK in the region.

### **Fence-sitting behavior**

This category consists of "opportunistic" militant groups who have exhibited an attitude of fence-sitting rather siding with either group. More than ideological affinity or other mutual interest, they seek to ally with the victor so as to have maximum gains. Considering a change in the landscape of global militancy, these groups fall in the "swing group" category. They keep independent identity by giving mixed signals to either sides of the conflict.

- Hezb-i-Islami Gulbadin (HIG), second major terrorist group in Afghanistan after the Taliban, has exhibited "fence-sitting behavior" as it seeks to emulate the Ikhwaans of Saudi Arabia by replacing various tribal factions through one unified Islamic state.
- Pakistani Taliban's splinter group Jamaat-ul-Aharar (JuA) has offered allegiance to IS but has kept itself open to invitations or temptations by Al-Qaeda as well in an attempt to leverage its position within the broader competition between IS and al-Qaeda.

### **Possibility of cooperation in future**

Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) uses religion as a political tool thus adding to the Sunni-Shia divide by aggravating Deobandi-Barelvi tensions, particularly in Punjab. Previously, this group has been linked to Ramzi Ahmed Yousuf who was the mastermind of the 1993 bombings of the World Trade Centre in New York. The agenda of SSP is to establish a Sunni-Islamic state in Pakistan, which is raising fears that its purist view of Sunni Islam might see it ideologically aligned to Islamic State and leads toward mutual cooperation (Osman, 2016).

Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) is explicitly a militant group; ideologically based on a hardcore Deobandi doctrine and has similarity with ideology of the Taliban.

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Previously, this group has worked with Afghan and Pakistani factions of Al-Qaeda. Both Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi militants fought against the Northern Alliance, alongside the Taliban. Due to the takfiri ideology, it has been seen that a number of their cadres have formed alliances with Islamic State's elements in Pakistan. Islamic State and LeJ are very similar ideologically because both the groups are igniting sectarian violence by carrying out attacks against Shia community (Osman, 2016).

### **An assessment of shifting reactions in response to Islamic State**

Keeping in view the distinct ideological bases, aims, agendas and operational methodology of Al-Qaeda, Taliban and ISK and the way various groups have respond to IS's rise it is important to assess what determines a group to either reject, bandwagon or exhibit a fence-sitting behavior.

Assaf Moghadam has outlined four categories of cooperation by assessing the nature of cooperating entities. According to him, five variables affect the nature of cooperation among the groups which are helpful in understanding the cooperation nature between jihadi groups (Moghadam, 2015).

**Table 2**  
*Typology of terrorist cooperation*

	<b>Duration</b>	<b>Degree of interdependence</b>	<b>Ideological affinity</b>	<b>Variety of cooperation</b>	<b>Trust level</b>
Mergers	Indefinite	High	High	All domains	High
Strategic alliance	Extended time	High but retains own identity	High	All domains	High
Tactical Cooperation	Relatively short span	Shared interests but no common ideology	Low	Selective domains	Low
Transactional Cooperation	Short span	Maintain full autonomy	No	Single domains	Low

Above mentioned table illustrates wide range of factors that possibly determine group's reaction to either ally or reject cooperation with the other group. The reaction of smaller jihadi groups in response to IS's rise discussed earlier clearly reflects that more that ideological commitments, strategic logic was more determining factor as majority of the groups had shifted their loyalties from al-Qaeda and Taliban with whom they had ideological strings attached. Majority of those groups who defected towards ISK have strategic interests instead of ideological commitments.

Retrieving data from various open-source reports and news agencies published between January 2014 to December 2017 charts has been made to illustrate the reaction of six important jihadi groups towards the rise of ISK. Figure 6 indicates whether a rival group publicly criticized ISK in a given year between 2014 and 2017 whereas Figure 7 indicates if there were any reports of a rival group's members defecting to ISK in a given year between 2014-2017.

**Figure 6 Rival Groups: Years in Which Leaders Publicly Criticized ISK**

		2014	2015	2016	2017
<b>Group Leadership Opposed to ISK</b>	Lashkar-e-Taiba		✓		✓
	Jamaat-ud-Dawa			✓	
	Haqanni Network				
	Afghan Taliban		✓		
<b>Group Leadership Divided</b>	Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan			✓	
	Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan		✓		

**Source:** Combating Terrorism Center (Watts, 2016)

The reactions of the groups either in support of ISK or anti-ISK category are changing with the change in political and security conditions in both, Afghanistan and Pakistan. By 2015, Tehreek-e-Khilafat, Hizb-e-Islami, and clerics of Lal Masjid and Jamia Hafsa had openly declared their support to Islamic State. Leaders from IMU and Shahid-ullah Shahid group have independently pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi. But by 2017 Jamaat ul Ahrar, Jandullah and IMU had entered the ISIS support zone. Groups like Sipa Sahaba Pakistan and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi are more likely to side with Islamic State because of ideological similarities. So, the trend of open rejection and divided loyalties towards ISK are less likely to remain constant and will keep on changing according to the change in strategic environment.

These shifting alliances are representing a change in equilibrium of strength and weaknesses. This disturbance in the regional balance of jihadi power can be a facilitating space for Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan but can also pose serious challenge to IS’s ambitions for Khorasan.

### **Regional implications of Wilayah Khorasan**

#### **Afghanistan**

Islamic State’s franchise in Afghanistan has both, prospects and challenges in future. The weak political system and ineffective governance in Afghanistan makes it vulnerable to fall in IS trap. It can exploit the state of public-state relations which are not at peace. The discord between the Taliban and government is a suitable model to exploit. Also, the ungoverned spaces can also facilitate the process of penetrating in the society and establishing a stronghold in the country.

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Salafist ideology is an added asset to gain support for the militants of Wilayah Khorasan. Poverty and high unemployment rate in Afghanistan makes it a fertile soil for recruitment of Khorasan force in the state. The widespread poverty and unemployment in Afghanistan could be easily exploited by this wealthy terrorist group and could get thousands of recruits for their terrorist activities. IS major source of money is through the exploitation of oil resources in Iraq and can exploit this region as it is a hub of Opium and generate funds for the operations in this region and beyond (Johnson, Karokhail & Amiri, 2016).

After the death of Mullah Omar, Taliban ranks has been seen divided and this division might favor Islamic State by branding their Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as a new hero and because of the transnational nature of this group. Islamic State's increasing presence in the region is creating security dilemma for the local Shia groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan and can trigger sectarian war between Shias and Sunni sects. Also, the fall of a stronghold in Syria, this group has advanced its presence and activities elsewhere and importantly in Afghanistan.

Apart from the prospects, the challenge posed by the Afghan Taliban is considered very important as Afghanistan serves as a home to Afghan Taliban. Therefore, any militant group replacing them or even challenging their authority would never be allowed. Also, the reaction of militant wings is crucial in determining the future challenges that this group might face. Groups like Haqqani Network have openly rejected to welcome ISIS influence in the region and since such groups have strong roots in Afghanistan so it might prove to be a major hurdle for IS to implement their agenda for Khorasan.

### **Pakistan**

The establishment of Wilayah Khorasan and emergence of Islamic State franchise here in Pakistan is a part of IS's global expansion strategy and can alter the existing Jihadi patterns in Pakistan. Tribal areas of Pakistan border with Nangarhar, Logar, Khost and Paktiya provinces of Afghanistan and there exists a porous border between the two states so there is a possible chance of increased transnational militancy across Federally Administrated Tribal Area (FATA) in Pakistan which is a fertile soil for jihadi groups like Haqqani network (Zahid & Khan, 2016).

ISIS mostly has urban, degree-holders middle class individuals unlike its counterparts like TTP, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan and Lashkar-e-Taiba. Therefore it attracts the vulnerable youth in Pakistan who are now pledging their loyalty to IS.

Pakistan might prove to be a fertile area for the Islamic State because of the presence of a similar school of thought, Ahl-e-Hadith. Ahl-e-Hadith is not theologically identical to Salafi Islam but the two movements share a lot in common. The environment of sectarian extremism in Pakistan may provide a sound ground for Islamic State in spreading its tentacles in the country.

Despite several factors that facilitate its presence in Pakistan, ISK still has to face challenges. Wilayah Khorasan has a major challenge of an ineffective leadership as three of its chiefs and other top leaders has been killed so far. Also, due to a complex jihadi network in Pakistan Islamic State is still struggling for establishing a foothold in Pakistan. There is a possibility that such groups create temporary

lesion with the Government and military establishment of Pakistan to repel the group's effect. Moreover, both civil and military leadership are comparatively stable than that of Afghanistan and has taken a lead in dealing strictly with the terrorists in its territory.

### **India**

India is an immediate neighbor of Pakistan and feels the fear of being radicalized by ISIS propaganda. It's a country with multiple ethnic and cultural ethnicities. According to 2011 census, Muslims are the second largest population in India which makes it vulnerable to fall in ISIS prey. The social fabric and political style is already dominated by Hindu extremist groups which has a continuous tradition of hate speech, communal violence and use of force against religious and ethnic minorities. This model of conflict can be exploited by Islamic State by training and financing likeminded vulnerable youth to create challenges for the state.

According to an estimate, the total number of ISIS affiliated fighters in India range between 7000-8000 (Bonesh, 2016). Reportedly, Abu Salman al-Hindi, an Islamic State commander of Indian stock, along with the militant group known as the Indian Mujahedeen (IM), has already trained more than 12 groups to join Islamic State (Pandey, 2016).

### **Central Asia**

Due to weak political and economic systems and a history of religious radicalization, Central Asia is considered vulnerable to the propaganda of Islamic State. The major issue of grave concern is the return of foreign fighters who have joined Islamic State in Iraq and Syria by migrating over there. According to International Crisis Group (ICG) report in 2015, the number citizens suspected of migrating to Iraq and Syria in for joining ISIS in last three years is around 4000. This fear was multiplied after the announcement of allegiance to ISIS from Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a major militant group in the region (Mumtaz, 2015). The threat is not alarming as Islamic state's response to the allegiance of IMU and other activities is not loud but instead it has completely ignored it. Moreover, it has less chance of getting linked to Wilayah Khorasan and would rather work as a separate Wilayah in future.

Islamic State has marked its presence in the South Asian region by announcing Wilayah Khorasan over the territories in Pakistan and Afghanistan. This presence of the group has raised security concerns in the region as Islamic State has an ambition to expand beyond the territories of Afghanistan and Pakistan once a strong hold is established of these territories. Pakistan and India are nuclear states and this reason makes this issue of great concern. The existence of the group in this region not only poses threat to regional peace and security but is a challenge for global security as well.

### **Potential outcomes**

The jihadi rivalry has surfaced up in the wake of IS's entry in the South Asian region. The implications of this internal-jihadi competition in the region will become clearer in future. There are three potential outcomes that might occur as a result of this.



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- Firstly, the eastward expansion of Islamic State in South Asia might steal the thunder of al-Qaeda and Taliban as many local Jihadi groups which were previously allied to the Taliban and al-Qaeda have defected to ISIS like Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).
- Secondly, this rivalry between Al-Qaeda, Taliban and Islamic State may lead to further infighting and a state of chaos and may weaken all the groups. Whilst they will be focused on their internal schism it will divert their attention from carrying out terrorist attacks. Similar was the case of Indian Mujahedeen (IM) who was torn apart over who they support. It led to defections and splits and is now fractured in two parts, one side aligned with al-Qaeda and the other defected to ISIS.
- The third scenario can be that the competition between the groups may spark off a new wave of terrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan in their struggle to portray themselves as a powerful competitor against the other group. Since the region is important with regards to its nuclear capacity so any threat to this region directly challenges the global peace and security condition and invite global actors to take a lead in regional apparatus.

The future of Wilayah Khorasan in Pakistan, Afghanistan and neighboring countries depends on some factors. Firstly, its success in this region is directly linked to its central core in Iraq and Syria. In case Islamic State survives and regain its strength in Iraq and Syria then the ongoing onslaught there by the US-led coalition including Russia, it will consequently attract more followers from around the globe including South Asia. Secondly, Islamic State might exploit the vacuum created in case if Afghan Taliban becomes fragmented. Thirdly, it can benefit itself from existing hostility between Sunni and Shia Muslims across the Muslim world, especially in Pakistan. Finally, Islamic State would see its prospects in South Asia in case if it receives state support either from inside or outside the region, or from non-state actors that are linked to states.

### **Recommendations**

Following recommendations are suggested:

- In order to curb terrorism, firstly the ideological roots need to be cut by not only keeping a record of Madrassas but to ensure Madrassa reforms. For this, religious scholars must educate and suggest a change in the syllabi of Madrassa by including peace study and a clear pacifist Islamic narrative.
- Both Pakistan and Afghanistan should focus on their broader economic, governance and security sector reforms, so that the economic grievances are addressed.
- It is important to strengthen the Afghan National Unity Government and train Afghan security forces to make Afghanistan self-sufficient to fight such threats on its own.
- Pakistan must implement National Action Plan in its true spirit and also make National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) fully operational.
- Efforts at regional level must be made to ensure regional peace and stability.

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