



The State of Jihadist Networks in Afghanistan and Pakistan

- The Taliban are ascendant in Afghanistan, where the number of terrorist attacks and amount of terrain they control are at their highest levels since September 11, 2001.
- The Taliban have yet to demonstrate an ability to hold major population centers in Afghanistan.
- The Islamic State – or ISIS – is seeking a foothold in Afghanistan, and it has conducted several high-profile attacks there, but its footprint is contained to a single remote region of the country.
- Terrorist attacks are on a sustained decline in neighboring Pakistan, where government and military targets are increasingly unreachable. Attacks against civilian targets continue.
- The Pakistan Army has shown itself to be capable of clearing and holding territory in counterinsurgency operations, and is taking steps toward political reform in territory once held by insurgents.

SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The Taliban are a resurgent force in Afghanistan, where they have been aided by a fragmented political, ethnic and social landscape. Sources of conflict in the region long known as “the graveyard of empires” abound, making it difficult for U.S. military forces to completely withdraw.

Despite changes in policy that have sequentially reduced the threshold for lethal U.S. military engagement against insurgent forces, the Taliban cannot be defeated militarily. Although they have not yet demonstrated an ability to hold major urban centers in Afghanistan, patterns of attacks have emerged that show the Taliban are more



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than capable of finding shelter and sustenance in rural areas, from whence they emerge repeatedly to overrun or temporarily claim key cities, continually bedeviling Afghan security and coalition forces. The war in Afghanistan remains mired in a costly stalemate, and jihadist forces there pose an existential threat to the country.

This frustrating narrative stands in sharp contrast to neighboring Pakistan, which, in relative terms, is a regional success story. Although the country remains home to a large number of militant groups – many of them long ago co-opted by the state in pursuit of its national security interests – military and security forces have succeeded in clearing territory once claimed by Pakistani Taliban and foreign militants linked to al-Qaeda. Terrorist violence has declined sharply in Pakistan since 2014, and military and government targets especially are increasingly out of reach for jihadists.

Moreover, local affiliates of ISIS pose only a limited threat. As in neighboring Afghanistan, ISIS militants' brand of "Salafist" Islam and animosity toward the Deobandi subsect (with which both the Taliban and al-Qaeda have formed strong regional ties) prevent the group from mushrooming in South Asia. That said, there is some ongoing risk that ISIS could draw disaffected militants from groups like Pakistan's Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) to its ranks.

This brief assesses the state of terrorist groups and trends in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, where state-making and the strength of political institutions are important underlying factors. It

attempts to argue policy positions for the United States to help stabilize the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, where political consensus is notably lacking; and to continue strengthening the hand of the Pakistani government against anti-state jihadists. Ultimately, Islamabad must adopt an exit strategy from its sponsorship of militant groups as proxies to make Pakistan and the broader South Asia region more secure.

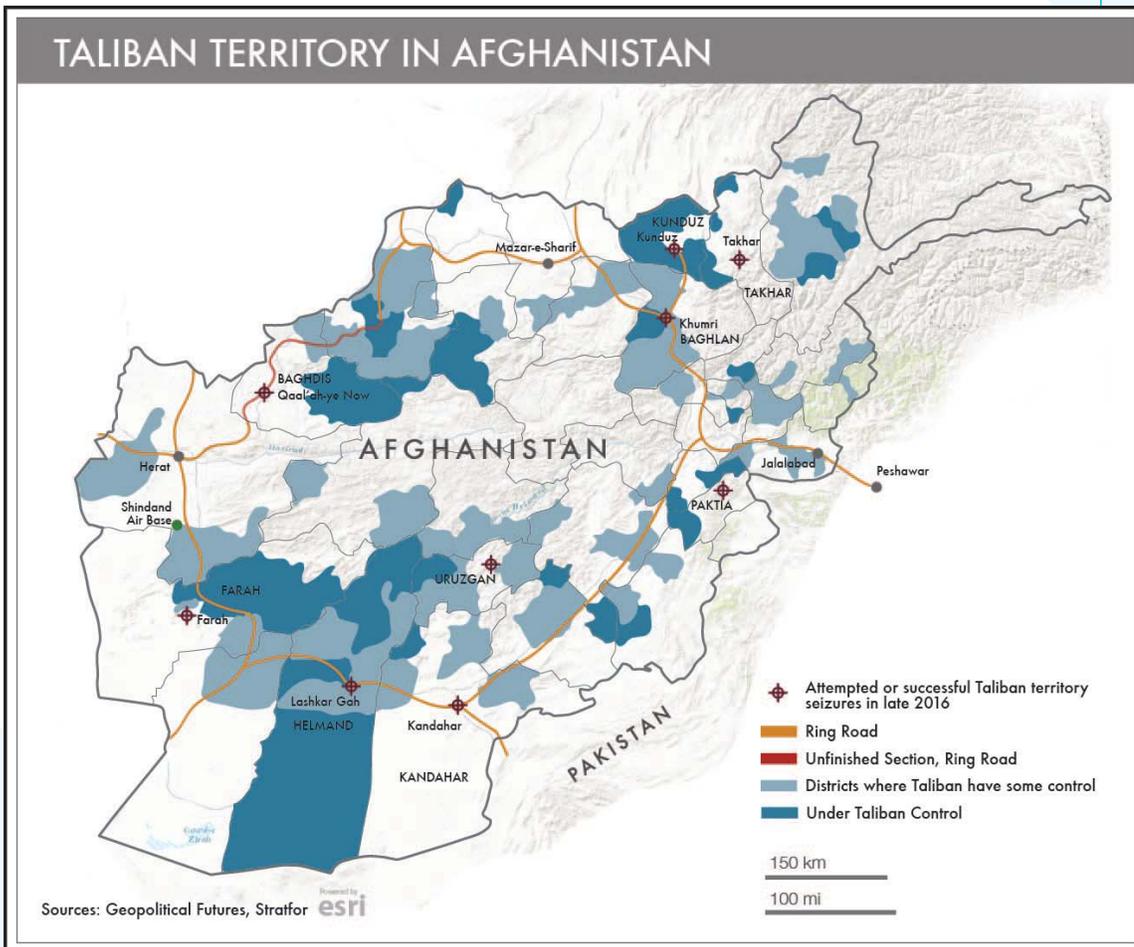
AFGHANISTAN: TALIBAN STRONGER AND UNITED, ISIS STUNTED

Afghanistan faces a resilient, if not surging, Taliban insurgent movement that maintains a sizable presence in virtually all corners of the country, including along the critical Ring Road—the circular highway that connects Afghanistan's major population centers to the capital, Kabul.

Today, the Afghan Taliban controls more territory than it has since 2001.¹ Additionally, war casualties this year are on pace to meet or exceed a record high since the fall of the Taliban regime.² In other words, the Taliban insurgency increasingly poses a challenge to the sovereignty of the Afghan government – both in terms of its control over territory and its monopoly over legitimate violence.

"Whac-A-Mole" in the Hindu Kush

In light of growing challenges to the Kabul government and a renewed threat of global jihadism, the Obama Administration over the course of 2016 modified its policy toward Afghanistan, expanding its ability to



engage in lethal military activity within the ambit of what it describes to be a non-combat presence in Afghanistan. Twice this year, Washington has eased the rules of engagement in Afghanistan, allowing for a greater use of force against the Afghan Taliban and the so-called Islamic State (or ISIS).^{3,4} The changes allow for U.S. troops to directly target ISIS militants in Afghanistan. Before this year, U.S. military personnel were allowed to target ISIS only if they posed a direct threat or were the targets of a specific counterterrorism operation. Also, U.S. forces are now allowed to accompany conventional Afghan military forces into the field (previously, they were permitted to accompany only Afghan special forces).

Additionally, in May 2016, the U.S. military conducted its first acknowledged drone strike in the Pakistani province of Balochistan, killing the leader of the Afghan Taliban, Mullah Akhtar Mansour.⁵ In July 2016, the Obama Administration announced that it would maintain a higher number of residual troop levels than planned. A total of 8,400 U.S. troops, instead of the originally planned 5,500, would remain in Afghanistan into early 2017 as part of a non-combat “train, advise and assist” effort.⁶

U.S. officials have claimed that the more assertive posture has improved the outlook in Afghanistan. For example, a senior U.S. military official

said that the new rules of engagement had yielded gains on the battlefield.⁷ Earlier, President Barack Obama described the killing of Mullah Mansour as an "important milestone in our longstanding effort to bring peace and prosperity to Afghanistan."⁸

In reality, the new policies have failed to produce strategic change; the Afghan Taliban are stronger than they have been in recent years and, despite some internal fissures, they comprise one of the most coherent political forces in the country. At best, the more permissive use of air power and U.S. special forces have helped to temporarily reverse Afghan Taliban advances and provide life support for the Kabul government. The Afghan government is locked in a game of "Whac-A-Mol" with Taliban insurgents, much like the Pakistan Army was from 2003 to 2009, before it began to take counterinsurgency operations seriously.

to deploy several hundred of his forces in the neighboring province. Abdul Raziq has been able to thwart the Afghan Taliban from making advances in Kandahar, but the Taliban subsequently launched coordinated attacks on the capitals of multiple provinces across the country: Baghdis, Baghlan, Kunduz and Takhar in the north; Farah in the west; and Helmand and Uruzgan in the south. Irrespective of whether the Taliban would be able to consolidate their gains, the same scenario is likely to repeat next year when the fighting season resumes in the spring.

There is no indication that the Afghan government will be able to resolve the systemic causes for the Taliban advances – for example, ethnic militias that target Pashtun civilians in Kunduz and Takhar, creating the impression that the Taliban are a lesser evil.¹⁰ The Afghan National Security and Defense Forces (ANSDF) are taking the lead in fighting, but with their low levels of literacy and paucity of skilled manpower, they are incapable of autonomously managing complex logistics networks and providing air support to ground combat operations. Governance, overall, is also in decline, and a political crisis – stemming from tensions between the president and chief executive officer over the fact that their power-sharing agreement has yet to be implemented – remains unresolved, despite reported progress on a deal. Ethnic tensions are also resurfacing, with protests by ethnic Hazaras and clashes between Tajiks and Uzbeks over the reburial of a former Afghan ruler.

The disunity in Kabul aids the Taliban insurgency.

In early October, the Afghan Taliban made another attempt to capture the province of Kunduz, overrunning parts of the capital city⁹ nearly a year after having briefly seized it. It also seized territory in neighboring Takhar province. At the time of the writing of this paper, the Afghan Taliban also made territorial gains in Paktia, and Helmand and Uruzgan in southern Afghanistan, forcing Gen. Abdul Raziq, the strongman of Kandahar,

The Afghan army's special forces contingents have shown prowess in combatting the Afghan Taliban, but the ANSDF faces growing casualty counts and a high rate of defections. The attrition rate for the Afghan National Army (ANA) is estimated to be between 15 to 20 percent per year.¹¹ In fact, it is unclear how many Afghan forces are in the fight. According to a U.S. government oversight authority, "neither the United States nor its Afghan allies know how many Afghan soldiers and police actually exist."¹² One source estimates real personnel at less than half of the 320,000 on paper.¹³ Air power and special forces cannot compensate for the weakness of the Afghan political and military system on the ground. Efforts have been made to provide the Afghan military with more aircraft, but it lacks sufficient personnel to operate and maintain its current inventory.¹⁴

Meanwhile, the Afghan Taliban appear to be more united today than compared to a year ago. The killing of Mansour, whose tenure was marked by acrimony, may prove to have been a favor to the Afghan Taliban. Although he managed to sideline alternative claimants to leadership, latent divisions within the group continued and were capable of resurfacing. His replacement, Mullah Haibatullah, is far less controversial. He has been able to quickly consolidate control over the insurgent group, which launched a relentless terror and insurgent campaign in the country in the summer of 2016. Sizable elements of

a dissident Taliban faction, which once tilted toward ISIS and later received financial and logistical support from the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, have now rejoined the mainline Afghan Taliban.^{15,16}

The Taliban's ascendancy comes as both Kabul and Washington have backed away from the Quadrilateral Group – a peace process led by Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and the United States. Kabul sees little reason to trust Islamabad, which appears to have oversold its ability to bring the Afghan Taliban to the table. U.S. intelligence agencies conducting surveillance on Pakistani leaders believe that Islamabad made a good-faith effort to bring the Taliban to talks, but were rebuffed by an obstinate Taliban leadership.¹⁷ Since then, Washington has sharpened its tilt toward New Delhi, exploring the possibility of an alternative framework – a trilateral group of Afghanistan, India and the United States – to buttress the Kabul government. But this grouping, in which two of the three members do not neighbor Afghanistan, cannot make up for the Kabul government's deficiencies and its tendency to self-injure. The disunity in Kabul aids the Taliban insurgency.

Creating Space for a Political Solution, or Death by a Thousand Cuts?

Since the end of U.S. combat operations in December 2014, a pattern has emerged in the subsequent two fighting seasons. The Afghan Taliban creep from rural strongholds to population

centers in areas under the central government's control, aided by targeted assassinations of key officials and the excesses of government-allied local police and militias. The Taliban then briefly gain control of a provincial or district capital, only to be pushed back by coalition air power and Afghan troops on the ground, who suffer high casualties and cause significant amounts of collateral damage. The Afghan Taliban return once again later in the same fighting season or the next one.

An unnamed senior U.S. official aptly described Afghanistan's present state as "a very ugly, very costly stalemate."¹⁸ This pattern is likely to repeat into the next few years, barring any major disruptive event impacting the Afghan Taliban or the political government in Kabul.

What, then, would be the longer-term impact of the oscillation of control of key pockets of the country from government to Taliban control? High civilian, military, and Taliban deaths? The use of militias and illegal sale of weapons? A plummeting economy and growing ethnic-political strife? Which side will tire first – the Afghan government or the Taliban insurgency?

The strategic challenge is to ensure that the Kabul government and broader Bonn framework that underpins it endure long enough for the Afghan Taliban to tire of war and come once again to the bargaining table. But when the Taliban would tire is unclear: it could possibly be in a few years or ten, but there is little

evidence to suggest that it would be in the near term.

Transnational Networks: Success in Containing ISIS, Al-Qaeda's Presence Murky

One success partially attributable to Afghan and coalition forces has been the suppression of the growth of the local affiliate of ISIS, which was officially recognized by the group's central leadership in January 2015. ISIS positioned itself in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region as a competitor to the Afghan Taliban and its partner, al-Qaeda.

The January 2015 issue of ISIS's flagship publication, *Dabiq*, nearly apostatized al-Qaeda and other jihadist groups operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan. But the local ISIS network, known as IS-Khurasan, which largely consists of Afghan Salafi jihadists and Pakistani Taliban defectors, bit off more than it could chew. It was in no position to overtake the ascendant Afghan Taliban, which has stronger rooting in the religious panoply in Afghanistan, due to its Sunni Deobandi background. (Deobandis are said to constitute the second-largest Sunni subsect in South Asia and dominate its jihadist landscape.) Al-Qaeda, a Salafi jihadist group, has thrived over several decades in South Asia as a result of a pragmatic partnership with Deobandi jihadist networks, despite doctrinal differences. In contrast, ISIS appears to require adoption of the Salafi creed and methodology to be part of its network and has condemned Pakistani Deobandis in al-Qaeda as "Sufis."

U.S. drone attacks and ground operations by Afghan special forces in Nangarhar province have helped stunt the growth of ISIS in Afghanistan. But the most critical factor has been opposition by the Afghan Taliban, which created a special forces unit to target ISIS networks.¹⁹

It should be noted that the presence of ISIS in Afghanistan is due to the safe haven provided by the Afghan government.²⁰ The Afghan intelligence service sought to provide refuge to disaffected Afghan and Pakistani Taliban militants and use them as proxies against Islamabad, in the latest round of a tit-for-tat game between the two countries. But the venture backfired. Those groups joined ISIS, although they continued cooperation with elements of the Kabul government. Then ISIS began to attack Afghan forces. Subsequently, they were targeted by a special unit of the Afghan Taliban, as well as U.S. drones and Afghan forces on the ground.

ISIS is highly unlikely to ever mount a serious insurgent challenge to the Afghan government. For a number of reasons – including sectarian and tribal – it will be unable to supplant the primary insurgent network, the Afghan Taliban. But it is capable of engaging in terror attacks that destabilize Afghanistan due to both the number of human lives lost and the externalities of inter-ethnic relations and foreign policy. Compared to neighboring Pakistan, Afghanistan has not had a major history of sectarian strife, but sectarian

attacks by ISIS could result in inter-ethnic unrest. For example, in July 2016, ISIS claimed responsibility for an attack on Hazara Shias. While the attack was motivated by anti-

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Shia sentiment, it took place as ethnic Hazaras – most of whom are Shia – protested against the central government, alleging that Kabul is excluding their Hazarajat region from a planned expansion of the national electricity grid. At the same time, other ethnic groups have grown tired of the presidency of ethnic Pashtun, Ashraf Ghani. The timing of the ISIS attack was indication to some Hazaras that elements of the Kabul government facilitated it, and it strengthened Hazara perceptions that the government wanted them sidelined.²¹

Similarly, ISIS has shown potential to exacerbate tensions between Afghanistan and its neighbors. In January 2016, ISIS also attacked the Pakistani consulate in Jalalabad, soon after a jihadist attack on the Indian consulate in Mazar-e Sharif, believed to have been perpetrated by Pakistan-backed militants.

In contrast to ISIS, the size and strength of the al-Qaeda presence in Afghanistan is murky. The U.S. intelligence community in

recent years has estimated that approximately 50 to 100 al-Qaeda operatives are based in Afghanistan,²² but after the discovery of a training camp for al-Qaeda's South Asia affiliate (AQIS) in southern Afghanistan last year, some observers have argued that those estimates were low.²³

Moreover, it is critical to distinguish between al-Qaeda (a core network consisting of Arab foreigners) and AQIS (a network of South Asian jihadists who were previously part of various Deobandi jihadist groups). AQIS moved to southern Afghanistan after the North Waziristan tribal area was cleared in Pakistan's Operation Zarb-e Azb, which is discussed in further detail below. Al-Qaeda central operatives appear to be in the country's east. The commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, Gen. John Nicholson, stated in September 2016 that al-Qaeda operatives have been killed or apprehended in a total of seven Afghan provinces, but he declined to specify the number of senior operatives in the country.²⁴ Al-Qaeda now plays a secondary role in the Afghanistan and Pakistan regions, compared to local jihadist networks. One reason is financial independence: The billion-dollar opium trade provides the Afghan Taliban with an estimated 40 percent of its funds.²⁵

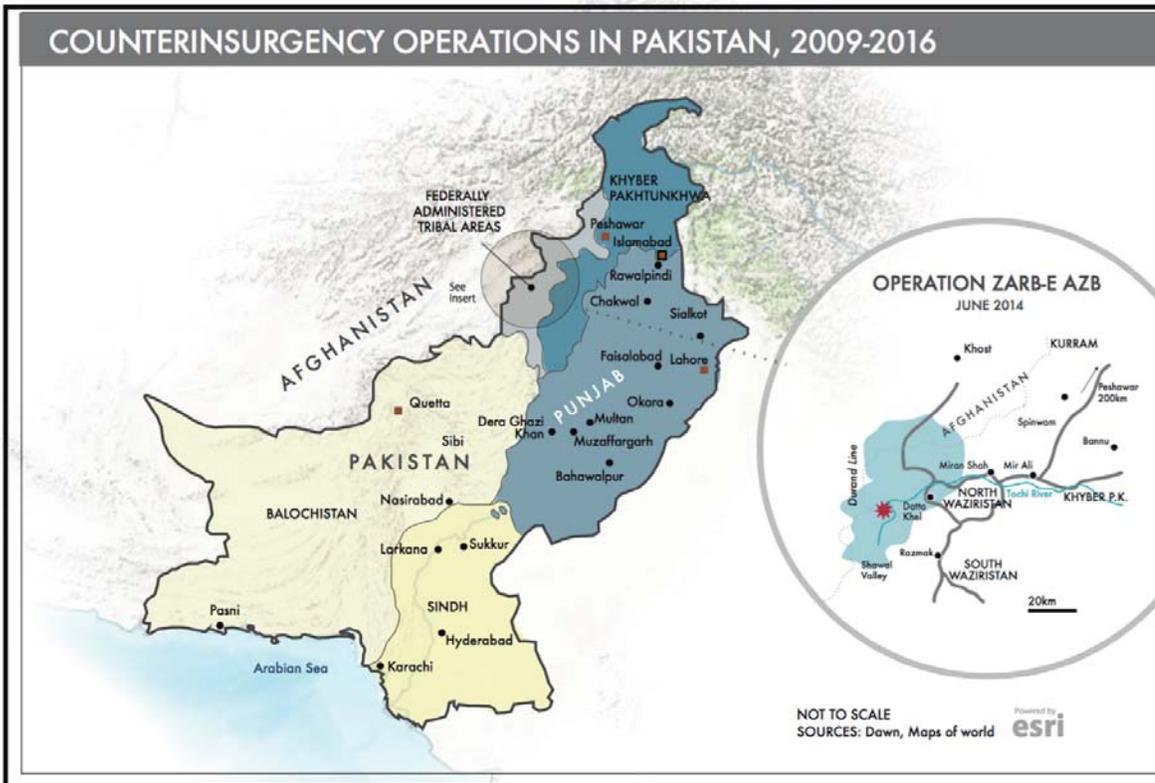
Al-Qaeda continues to use the Afghan Taliban and its "Islamic Emirate"-in-waiting as counterweights to ISIS and its so-called caliphate. In June 2016, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri pledged allegiance to the

new Afghan Taliban emir, as he had done with Mullah Omar and his successor, Mullah Akhtar Mansour. For al-Qaeda, the importance of the Afghan Taliban is that it provides not just a narrative for re-establishing a beachhead in South Asia, but also an insurgency that has been successful in largely removing U.S. forces from the region and has the potential to gain control over the country. Another factor contributing to the Taliban's importance for al-Zawahiri: He likely depends on the good will of elements of the Afghan Taliban for survival. Unnamed U.S. officials believe al-Zawahiri is hiding along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region.²⁶

PAKISTAN: JIHADISTS CONTAINED, BUT AN END GAME NEEDED

Pakistan faces a more complex jihadist challenge than Afghanistan but, due to the coherence of its state and resolve of its security forces, it has been moving in the opposite direction, with a sharp reduction in violence since 2014.

The central paradigm guiding post-2007 U.S. strategy toward the region has been the notion of "Af-Pak," a singular battlefield consisting of Afghanistan and the adjacent border regions of Pakistan. That binary has largely been severed, however, due to successful Pakistani counterinsurgency operations. Since 2009, the Pakistan Army conducted military operations in all seven tribal areas bordering Afghanistan and in the Malakand Division. It also conducted smaller-scale operations targeting jihadists in parts of the



Balochistan and Punjab provinces, and urban counterinsurgency operations in the megacity of Karachi.²⁷

The end result of these operations is that Pakistan has largely (not completely) insulated itself from events in Afghanistan, although insurgents based in Pakistan continue to flow into Afghanistan. U.S. officials allege that Pakistan serves as a safe haven for the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani Network – a place where fighters base their families, go for rest and receive medical treatment.

Pakistan has flushed its tribal areas of foreign militants, particularly those belonging to al-Qaeda and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Similarly, the Pakistani Taliban

networks have largely been evicted from Pakistani territory, although many rank-and-file operatives, mid-level commanders and sleeper cells remain throughout the country. Nonetheless, the principal insurgent networks the Pakistani military has been combatting since 2007 – the Pakistani Taliban and its main transnational partner, al-Qaeda – have been substantially degraded and are unlikely to regenerate as insurgent forces capable of controlling significant swaths of territory.

Despite the marked progress, containing and eliminating jihadist networks requires a generation-long effort by the Pakistani state in countering the militant ideology and the complete abandonment of the use of jihadists as proxies.

Terrorism Trends: Down, But Some High-Impact, High-Casualty Attacks

Since 2014, terrorism has dropped precipitously in Pakistan. Civilian deaths from terrorist attacks declined by 40 percent in 2014, compared to the previous year.²⁸ In 2015, they fell by 50 percent on a year-on-year basis.

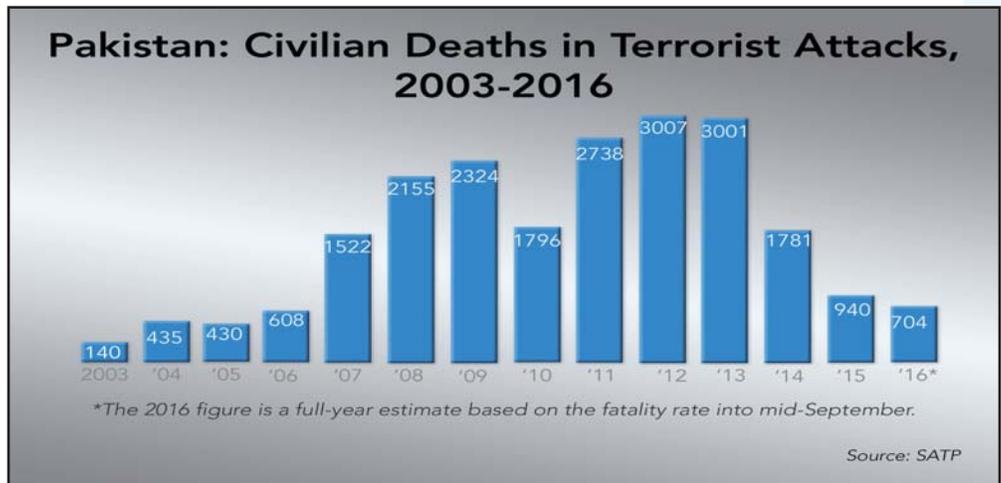
In 2016, the decline was less steep. If current trend lines continue, civilian deaths from terrorism will drop by 25 percent. A closer look at the numbers indicates a decline in the frequency of overall attacks and a disproportionate number of civilian deaths coming from a handful of brazen attacks. Nearly one-third of civilian casualties from terrorism have come from two attacks: one targeting Christians at a park in Lahore, and another targeting lawyers in Quetta.

Anti-state militants find government targets to be inaccessible, yet continue to target civilians as they have since the start of a full-fledged Taliban insurgency in 2007.

The Pakistani Success: Fragmentation of Anti-State Networks, Denial of Space

What Pakistan has been able to achieve is remarkable: a marked, multi-year decline in terrorism despite a complex, multifaceted domestic terrorism threat and severely unfavorable exogenous, geopolitical factors – all without the presence of foreign combat and special operations forces.

In 2013, Pakistan held largely free and fair elections that resulted in the country's first transition of power from one democratically elected government to another. The new government, run by the center-right Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) party, opened up a number of channels of negotiation with the Pakistani Taliban insurgents based in North Waziristan. During the course of this process, terror attacks – including sectarian violence – soared in Pakistan, and the Pakistani Taliban umbrella organization began



to fracture. A Taliban splinter group, Ahrar-ul-Hind, emerged with the aim of defying a ceasefire agreed to by the Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), led by Maulvi Fazlullah. At the same time, violence in Karachi, mainly perpetrated by non-jihadist militants, metastasized. By the end of the year, a new army chief, Gen. Raheel Sharif, came into office and quickly initiated an aggressive, lethal engagement of the terrorists, launching airstrikes against anti-state militant safe havens in North Waziristan. By June 2014, the army was able to compel a reluctant civilian government to go forward with ground operations in North Waziristan, an action known as Operation Zarb-e Azb.

Within months, key parts of North Waziristan were cleared by the Pakistan Army. Insurgents fled to the forests of the Shawal Valley, straddling the border of North and South Waziristan. They also moved to northern Balochistan, the Khyber Agency, and various parts of Afghanistan, where they were welcomed by Afghan security officials. The Pakistan Army also conducted cleanup operations in the Khyber Agency and northern Balochistan, and intensified counterterrorism operations in Karachi and parts of Punjab.

The end result has been that anti-state militants have been largely denied space in Pakistani territory, leading to a precipitous drop in domestic terrorism. Through a framework known as the National Action Plan (NAP), the Pakistani federal government and provinces

TYPE	GROUPS	STATUS
Anti-state Jihadists	Ahrar-ul-Hind, Lashkar-e Islam, "Punjabi Taliban," TTP, TTP-JA, other TTP factions	Mainly fragmented and forced to seek refuge in Afghanistan. Some co-opted by the state.
Afghanistan-focused Jihadists	Afghan Taliban, Hafiz Gul Bahadur group (HGB), Haqqani Network, Hizb-e Islami Gulbuddin (HIG)	Continue to operate. HIG has signed a peace deal with the Kabul government. The HGB group was targeted by the Pakistani state in Operation Zarb-e-Azb and is now based in Afghanistan, where it is allegedly supported by Afghan intelligence. ²⁹ Other elements of the HGB have maintained a truce with the Pakistani state. ³⁰
India-focused Jihadists	Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, Hizb-ul-Mujahideen, Jaish-e Muhammad, Lashkar-e Taiba	Largely contained by Indian and Pakistani forces. Conduct periodic and low-intensity attacks and occasional high-profile assaults on Indian military targets. Continue to fundraise and organize with impunity in Pakistan.
Sectarian Jihadists	Lashkar-e Jhangvi	Contained, but survive due to continued tolerance for sectarian agitators.
Transnational Jihadists and Local Affiliates	AQ, AQIS, IMU, IS-K	Contained, stunted or evicted from Pakistani soil.

– in a process largely stewarded by the Pakistan Army – have combined kinetic operations with a tough crackdown on anti-state (and to some extent, sectarian) terrorist financing and propaganda.

As Pakistan experienced the gains from Operation Zarb-e Azb and NAP, sectarian violence surged across the Middle East; ISIS emerged as a new leader of the global jihad, invigorating radicals worldwide; and violence in neighboring Afghanistan continued to surge. Pakistan has been able to insulate itself from a region on fire.

Al-Qaeda in Pakistan: A Shadow of its Former Self

U.S. drone strikes have decimated al-Qaeda's foreign core and its South Asian partners in Pakistan. The terror

group is down, but not out: It has a notional basis through which to endure in South Asia even after the death of al-Zawahiri.

In September 2014, al-Zawahiri announced the formation of an affiliate in South Asia (AQIS).³¹ It is led by Sana ul Haq, a religious cleric from northern India who goes by the nom de guerre Asim Umar.³² In the same month, the group conducted a series of high-profile attacks, including the attempted hijacking by a rogue officer of a naval vessel, the PNS Zulfiqar, in the Arabian Sea port of Karachi and the successful assassinations of an ISI officer in Sargodha, Punjab, and a university dean in Karachi.³³ Although the attempted hijacking was a failure, it reflected the ability of AQIS to penetrate the Pakistani military.³⁴

However, AQIS's momentum quickly dissipated as Pakistani forces cleared North Waziristan and launched counterterrorism raids in all four provinces, and U.S. drone strikes eliminated much of the senior leadership of both AQ and AQIS. In late 2014, Pakistani security forces killed Adnan El-Shukrijumah, a senior al-Qaeda central official who had evaded U.S. authorities for more than a decade.³⁵ A senior American al-Qaeda operative, Adam Gadahn, was killed in a January 2015 drone strike. According to AQIS spokesman Usama Mehmood, approximately 50 AQIS operatives were killed in drone strikes from 2014 into the spring of 2015.³⁶ Among those killed were Qari Imran, the deputy emir, and Ahmed Farooq – al-Qaeda's most prominent Urdu-language propagandist. Raids

throughout central and southern Punjab, as well as Karachi and parts of Balochistan, resulted in the arrests or deaths of dozens of AQIS operatives.

AQIS has continued with small-scale terrorist activity, but it appears unable to play an anchoring role in jihadist activity in Pakistan. While al-Qaeda, at its peak in Pakistan, opposed some attacks on civilians by the TTP, its condemnation was in private communication. In contrast, AQIS has been forced to make its condemnation public, signaling its need to distance itself from deeply unpopular actions, its inability to control the various Taliban groups in Pakistan and, possibly, limited channels of communication between AQIS and TTP networks, which are based in Afghanistan. AQIS explicitly condemned major attacks conducted and claimed by various Pakistani Taliban outfits, including the December 2014 Peshawar school attack, the January 2016 attack on a government office in Mardan, and the March 2016 attack on a university in Charsadda. Usama Mehmood, the AQIS spokesman, declared these attacks to be "Islamically impermissible and criminal."

In a video that was posthumously released in June 2015, Gadahn stated that al-Qaeda's decision to form a South Asia affiliate was finalized in mid-2013, well before the break with ISIS. But AQIS has an extensive sleeper cell network in Pakistan, so Pakistani security forces continue a vigilant crackdown.³⁷ Members of AQ and AQIS continue to be arrested or killed in joint ISI-provincial police raids

across Pakistan.^{38,39} One notable arrest this year was that of Abdul Rehman Sindhi, a long-time AQ-affiliated, U.N.-sanctioned operative based in Karachi.⁴⁰

Although AQIS has issued calls for attacks in India and remains active in Bangladesh, its leadership has identified Pakistan as the main target in South Asia, excluding Afghanistan. In a September 2016 audio statement, AQIS spokesman Usamah Mehmood called on jihadists in the subcontinent to focus on Pakistan. A separate recording by Mehmood released at the same time consisted largely of a tirade against the Pakistani state, although its topic was ostensibly the crisis in Kashmir.

The ISIS Network in Pakistan: Slow Growth in a Crowded Market

In June 2014, ISIS announced its so-called caliphate – a cataclysmic event that reverberated across jihadist networks worldwide, challenging the hegemony of al-Qaeda as the vanguard of the global Sunni jihad. By the fall, Pakistani newspapers reported sightings of graffiti in favor of ISIS.^{41,42,43,44} At the same time, many observers speculated on the possible defection of al-Qaeda-linked groups in Pakistan into the orbit of ISIS.

It was not until January 2015, however, that ISIS formally recognized a local affiliate, known as the “Khorasan Province.” The group consisted of “Salafists” based in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region, Pakistani Taliban defectors from the Orakzai region, and segments of the IMU, pushed out from North Waziristan. It

was led by Hafiz Saeed Khan until his death in 2016.⁴⁵ As in Afghanistan, ISIS has yet to gain a significant foothold in the jihadist space in Pakistan. While the group’s “Salafism” limits its appeal to a broad segment of Pakistanis, there is continued risk that the group could make inroads into the “Salafi jihadist” space in Pakistan dominated by Lashkar-e Taiba.

For the first time, in early September 2016, the Pakistan Army recognized that ISIS had been attempting to establish a formal network in Pakistan. Lt. Gen. Asim Bajwa, the military’s chief spokesman, provided a detailed presentation on the ISIS network in Pakistan. Bajwa stated that ISIS had “made a concerted effort to intrude into Pakistan” and had organized itself into two halves: *kutaiba haris*, responsible for strategic planning, and *kutaiba mubashir*, responsible for executing attacks.

Although ISIS has claimed many attacks in Pakistan, including ones claimed by other militant groups, Bajwa attributed only a few major attacks to the terror network, including those on four Pakistani news channels over a two-month period from late 2015 into early 2016.⁴⁶ ISIS was also responsible for the targeted killings of almost 30 security personnel, as well as the murder of Sabeen Mehmud, a prominent civil society activist.⁴⁷ The group has planned other attacks in Pakistan, including strikes targeting the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, foreign embassies and consulates, the Islamabad airport, and important public figures and prominent journalists.

Bajwa claimed that Pakistani security forces have arrested 309 ISIS operatives – including its Pakistan leader, Hafiz Umar; 25 Afghans, Iraqis, Syrians and other foreign operatives; and 157 “freelancers,” i.e., local criminals and terrorists. Some of those arrested include non-ISIS members who were paid by the terrorist group (roughly \$10) to graffiti pro-ISIS slogans in various parts of Pakistan.

Most militant networks in Pakistan are from the Deobandi subsect of Sunni Islam. The Deobandis are the second-largest subsect in majority-Sunni Pakistan. They likely are the best-funded and most-organized, boasting the largest number of religious seminaries among any Sunni or Shia subsect. Unlike al-Qaeda, ISIS has been unwilling to make pragmatic alliances with Deobandi militant groups. It has excoriated leading members of AQIS as “Sufis,” and lambasted Mullah Omar for having committed “grave errors” in religious interpretation.⁴⁸

While ISIS is unlikely to supplant established Deobandi jihadist networks in Pakistan, it can find a deadly niche in the country. Worryingly, the group has attracted some college- and graduate-educated Pakistanis, as well as defectors from Lashkar-e Taiba (LeT), the most potent Salafi-oriented jihadist group in Pakistan. In December 2015, Pakistani officials announced the arrest of former members of Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD), the socio-political front group for LeT, who had joined ISIS.⁴⁹ Around the same time, news broke of Pakistani

women, with some linkage to LeT, who fled for ISIS-controlled Syria with their children.^{50,51}

These news reports proved to be embarrassing for JuD. It quickly launched a propaganda campaign against ISIS – branded as “Al-Fitan” or “the Upheavals” – perhaps at the insistence of the Pakistani government. JuD released a flashy anti-ISIS documentary that resembles the aesthetics of ISIS propaganda, condemning the group as “khawarij” (reviled rebels) and the “dogs of hell” for its killings of Muslims and other civilians. It also launched a social media hashtag campaign against ISIS.

While LeT has continued operations against Indian security personnel in Kashmir, it is significant that there has not been a major LeT attack in India since 2008. LeT faces a new competitor in ISIS and, at the same time, is likely under significant pressure by the Pakistani government to restrain its terrorism inside India.

JuD, the LeT front group, is also growing increasingly active inside Pakistan, operating an ambulance service and a relief and recovery non-governmental organization. In fact, JuD has become an international organization, openly collecting donations for its relief operations in 12 countries or foreign regions, including Gaza, Kashmir and Syria.⁵²

While some criticize JuD as radicalizing Pakistani civil society, it could actually be pulling LeT recruits away from the path of violence. JuD’s social media activists describe

themselves as involved in counter-narrative and counter-radicalization efforts. But the JuD/LeT balancing act of espousing “Salafism” and supporting jihad against India and the West, while abstaining from targeting the Pakistani state, could be too unwieldy. As long as ISIS remains a powerful geopolitical force, some within JuD/LeT could tire of the group’s passive approach and move toward ISIS instead.

To consolidate its gains from Operation Zarb-e Azb and a series of preceding military operations, Pakistan must devise and implement an exit strategy from the use of jihadist networks as an instrument of state policy. Jihadist networks have tarnished Pakistan’s advocacy for the rights of Kashmiris, depleted its trust with all of its neighbors and deterred foreign investment in Pakistan’s economy that would put it on a track toward rapid, sustainable and equitable economic growth. Pakistan’s strategic planners must understand that economic strength provides geostrategic capital that far outstrips what jihadist networks can offer, and with none of the associated risks.

CONCLUSION

The jihadist insurgencies in Afghanistan and Pakistan are moving in opposite directions. In Afghanistan, the Afghan Taliban insurgency endured the temporary U.S. military “surge,” and each year since has been more violent than the previous one. In Pakistan, anti-state jihadists have been evicted from their final safe haven, the North Waziristan tribal area.

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The Pakistan Army has stated that it will continue to maintain almost 200,000 personnel in insurgency-hit areas until 2019, so there is a strong likelihood that the country’s counterinsurgency gains will endure. While the Pakistani Taliban insurgent network has been divided, degraded and denied control of territory, Pakistan must ensure that a new anti-state jihadist threat does not emerge from JuD/LeT members defecting toward ISIS and producing a new urban terrorist challenge.

For the Afghan state, the jihadist threat is existential. The Afghan Taliban cannot be defeated militarily. But the current government in Kabul must endure long enough for the Afghan Taliban to view continued war as a prospect offering diminishing returns. The regime in place in Afghanistan is one filled with ex-jihadists, including figures once tied to al-Qaeda. Their presence in power, and the recent peace deal with Hizb-e Islami Gulbuddin, give reason for hope that a negotiated settlement to the Taliban insurgency is possible.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Political stability is a prerequisite for a negotiated settlement to the insurgency in Afghanistan. Washington must ensure that the national unity government

in Kabul survives and moves forward with finalizing and implementing electoral reforms, as President Ghani and Chief Executive Officer Abdullah agreed to do in their power-sharing deal. These reforms, which include revamping the election commission and developing a new voter identification system are key to keeping Afghanistan's major constituent elements in the political system. A structured peace process also requires that both Ghani and Abdullah speak with one voice on negotiations with the Taliban and prevent actors in their camp from playing the role of spoiler. The United States must continue to reiterate its support for talks with the Afghan Taliban, while also making clear that it will combat both al-Qaeda and ISIS networks in the country so long as they exist.

2. Washington should continue providing financial and military hardware assistance for Pakistan's operations combating al-Qaeda and other jihadist networks. The Coalition Support Funds, which have reimbursed the Pakistan Army for counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations conducted since the 9/11 attacks, should be continued, even if much of the aid remains conditioned upon Pakistan taking action against the Haqqani Network.
3. The incoming Trump Administration must commit energy at the highest levels to ensure cooperation between the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan in securing their shared border. Washington should support Islamabad's efforts to mandate that those who cross the shared border are identified and screened by security personnel, being persistent in efforts to support the formalization of border security, including screening on both sides and coordination between Afghan and Pakistani border personnel.
4. The Trump Administration should concentrate efforts on bolstering special forces units and other higher-impact units in the ANSDF that can protect provincial capitals. It should resist the urge to reach unattainable force levels through the employment of militias. Lower-quality forces do more harm than good by selling their weapons and abusing civilians.
5. Donor countries, including the United States, must provide financial and logistical assistance to the government of Afghanistan in dealing with the impending crisis of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from within Afghanistan and returnees from refugee communities in Iran and Pakistan. Recent winters in Afghanistan have been particularly tough, resulting in the preventable deaths of dozens of newborns and infants in IDP enclaves in the Kabul area.

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