



**INSTITUTE OF
STRATEGIC STUDIES**

web: www.issi.org.pk
phone: +92-920-4423, 24
fax: +92-920-4658

Issue Brief

Growing Threat of ISIS: What Should Pakistan Do?

Kashif Mumtaz, Senior Research Fellow, ISSI

August 11, 2015

When the leaders of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) met in early July in the Russian city of Ufa for the 15th SCO Summit, the agenda of their talks was dominated by the growing threat of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the region, particularly in Afghanistan and Central Asian states. This was evident not only in the statements from high-ranking officials of SCO member states in the run up to the Summit, but also during the Summit proceedings.

The most unequivocal of such statements came from Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, who, at a conference on 'Security and Stability in the SCO Region', held in Moscow on July 4, had declared that ISIS was more dangerous than al-Qaeda, and that Russia was concerned about the emergence of units of this organization in Afghanistan, which is close to the borders of Central Asia. This sentiment also permeated the Summit proceedings, which noted that ISIS had stepped up its activities and spread its tentacles to Afghanistan, which elevated the security threats on the southern borders of SCO.

The high importance that the Summit accorded to the issue of ISIS' expansion in several SCO countries underscores the growing threat that this terrorist organization poses to peace and stability in the SCO region. Having emerged as an offshoot of al-Qaeda in Iraq, ISIS has grown to become widely recognized as 'the most powerful and effective *jihadi* group in the world.¹Adept at terrorizing its foes and common people alike and merciless in its treatment of its opponents, ISIS is also the most feared terrorist group. ISIS is a highly organized militia, which has conquered territories in Syria and Iraq. Thanks to these military victories, the militia is now ruling over the territories that are home to some six and a half million people. That these victories were secured against national armies of Iraq and Syria are ample proof of ISIS' military prowess, a phenomenon that is bound to have frightened many in the region.

The more threatening, however, is ISIS' espousal and propagation of a transnational *jihadi* ideology and its quest to establish *khilafat*, claiming exclusive political and theological authority over the world's Muslims, which attracts many Muslims from all parts of the world. While many such Muslims have travelled to Syria to join ISIS' ranks, others have sworn allegiance to the militia while continuing to live in their own countries, raising the fear of ISIS' growing ingress in these countries. Such fears have been voiced by authorities in several parts of the world, including South, Central and (even) Southeast Asia. It seems, however, that it is the fear of ISIS' presence in Afghanistan, which has caused anxiety in many parts of the world, including some powerful capitals such as Washington D.C., Moscow and Beijing.

ISIS is making increasing inroads into Afghanistan. It is particularly active in Helmand, Frayab and Nangarhar provinces. In January 2015, ISIS announced the formation of Khurasan Shura - a council of leaders to oversee the group's operations in the area roughly comprising modern day Afghanistan and Pakistan. There have been reports of skirmishes between ISIS and Taliban fighters. On June 8, 2015, *Daily Mail* reported that ISIS fighters had beheaded at least 10 Taliban commanders in Nanghar province.² It is against this background that the Afghan authorities, which earlier denied the presence of ISIS in Afghanistan, now accept it. In the words of General John Campbell, the top US commander in Afghanistan, ISIS has gone from being 'nascent' in Afghanistan to 'operationally emergent'.

In his address to the US Congress in March 2015, Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani, said that ISIS posed a terrible threat to his country and others in Afghanistan, maintaining that the terrorist group was sending its members to southern and western Afghanistan to "test for vulnerabilities." Ghani is so concerned about the growing threat of ISIS in his country that he is reported to have requested the US President, Barak Obama, to keep US troops in Afghanistan after 2016. He has even suggested that the US and its allies could use Afghanistan as a counter-terrorism base to oppose the rise of ISIS throughout the region.

The SCO's concern about ISIS establishing a stronghold in Afghanistan and posing challenges to regional peace and stability is better understood when one recalls the context of the Taliban-era Afghanistan, when al-Qaeda used the fragile Afghan state as sanctuary to launch the most spectacular attack on the US soil on 9/11, which had led the US policy makers realize that "America is now threatened less by conquering states than by falling ones."³ The other major powers too appear to have deduced the same lesson from 9/11. The failure of the US' state-building project in Iraq, which ultimately led to the rise of ISIS, has only confirmed the veracity of this lesson.

ISIS and Pakistan

ISIS has set its sights on creating a base in South Asia as well, and fears have been expressed by certain quarters about the possible activities of the terrorist entity in Pakistan. Pakistan's Interior Minister claims that ISIS has no presence in the country. The Balochistan government is reported to have, however, warned the federal government in a 'secret information report' of the increasing footprint of the militant organisation in Pakistan.

It seems that ISIS may be content with recruiting fighters from amongst Pakistani militant organizations to fight in Iraq and Syria since it would not be possible for it to establish in Pakistan the type of presence it has in fragile states like Iraq and Syria. Hasan Askari Rizvi has elaborated this point:

“Extreme movements take roots in states that experience sustained internal chaos and strife, and where the state is paralysed or it is unable to assert its primacy in parts of its territory. Such signs can be identified in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Somalia. In Pakistan, the ongoing security operation in North Waziristan and the assertion of the primacy of the state in other tribal areas aim at denying the militants any opportunity for controlling an exclusive and secure area to entrench themselves and set up hideouts, and training and weapons storage facilities on a permanent basis.”⁴

Though, the fears of ISIS having made inroads into Pakistan are largely unfounded, the history of religious militancy, the growing radical extremism, weak law enforcement and yawning socio-economic inequalities in Pakistan, and ISIS' growing international profile, including its increasing presence in the neighbouring Afghanistan, mean that the possibility of ISIS' ingress into Pakistan cannot be ruled out altogether. Pakistan's policy makers should therefore earnestly commit themselves to devising and implementing strategies to deal with the challenges posed by ISIS. Such strategies ought to be formulated keeping in view all aspects of the problem.

Most importantly, Pakistan need not panic about the allegedly increasing presence of ISIS, as suggested by some news reports citing anonymous sources or by the claims made by the so-called "ISIS commanders" in the region. Pakistani militants are known to make exaggerated claims about their real strength.⁵ Most of the incidents, which have been interpreted by some as the signs of the ISIS' presence - emergence of pro-ISSI graffiti at some places, distribution of ISIS' pamphlets, hoisting of an ISIS flag in Taxila, for example - are in fact isolated incidents, perpetrated by some local militants. These, in no way, can be viewed as a harbinger of ISIS' imminent rise.

Moreover, Pakistan is not a fragile state like Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan. It has a well-functioning government, a thriving economy, an increasingly robust democracy, which is serving as an effective channel for aggregating and reconciling diverse societal interests, and a strong military, which is committed to countering terror in every form and at every place in the country. The ongoing operation Zarb-i-Azb, which has drastically brought down the level of terrorist violence in the country is ample

proof not only of the Military's commitment to fighting the menace of terror, but also of its ability to successfully handle this challenge.⁶

In its counter-terrorism efforts, the military enjoys support of all segments of society and all state institutions. In fact, operation Zarb-i-Azb's successes have been complimented by those of National Action Plan (NAP) - a national counter-terrorism plan announced by Prime Minister, Nawaz Shrif, in the wake of the horrendous terrorist attack on Army Public School Peshawar on December 16, 2014.⁷ NAP is a comprehensive counter-terrorism plan that adopts a multi-pronged strategy, from execution of convicted terrorists to banning hate speech and choking financial sources of terrorism,⁸ to eradicate extremism from Pakistan. It also provides an effective means to deal with the challenge posed by ISIS. When viewed against this backdrop, most of the fears of ISIS making inroads into Pakistan appear misplaced.

None of the above mentioned factors, however, should lull Pakistani policy makers into complacency. ISIS cannot establish a stronghold in Pakistan like in Iraq or Syria; yet, it has the potential to be a major destabilizing factor. Its growing international profile could make joining ISIS an attractive option for Pakistani militants who are under immense pressure from the state's concerted anti-terrorism efforts, which are making it increasingly difficult for them to operate in Pakistan. This could pave the way for ISIS being able to establish foothold in Pakistan. This 'splinter group' phenomenon has the potential to create serious security challenges for Pakistan. The country should devote special attention and resources to monitor and eradicate such elements.

Moreover, Pakistan must take Operation Zarb-i-Azb to its logical end, implement NAP in letter and spirit, and focus on broader governance and security sector reforms, particularly with regard to urban policing. A working democracy which gives people a sense of ownership of the system, governance that delivers and is responsive to people's needs and concerns and an equitable apportioning of national resources are the factors which keep common man's hopes alive, and prevent him from falling prey to extremist ideologies, such as the one espoused by ISIS. An unwavering focus on countering extremism is *sine qua non* to deny ISIS and similar elements continuous supply of indoctrinated young fighters. This violent extremism can be best countered only when Pakistan has its own compelling national narrative; and all political, military and administrative measures to counter terrorism and extremism are guided by this narrative.

Notes and References:

- ¹. Patrick Cockburn, *The Rise of Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution*, London and New York: Verso, 2015, p. 2.
- ² 'ISIS terrorists ambush and behead 10 Taliban fighters in Afghanistan as the bloody rivalry between the terror group intensifies', *Daily Mail*, June 8, 2015.
- ³ 'The National Security Strategy of the United States of America', September 2002, at <<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/63562.pdf>>
- ⁴ Hasan Askari Rizvi, "The Islamic State Movement and Pakistan," *The Express Tribune*, November 3, 2014.
- ⁵ At <<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/taliban-attack-prison-in-pakistan-free-militants/>>
- ⁶ Zahid Hussain, 'Beyond Zarb-i-Azb', *Dawn*, June 17, 2015.
- ⁷ 'Nawaz constitutes special committee to implement National Action Plan', *Dawn*, December 26, 2014.
- ⁸ 'National Action Plan; <http://nacta.gov.pk/Download_s/Presentations/National_Action_Plan_NACTA_Pakistan.pdf>