

# The Islamic State and al-Qaeda in Pakistan

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The Islamic State's (ISIS) credentials substantially improved after their conquest of Mosul in 2014. In only two years, this al-Qaeda splinter group has spread into most Middle Eastern countries, the Islamic Maghreb, South and Southeast Asia, and has established cells and inspired individual attacks in Europe and North America.

Not much has been studied and analyzed about the growing ISIS network in Pakistan and its founder's connections to the Islamist ideologues and terrorist organizations in the country. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi began his jihadi career in Pakistan in the late 1980s, and it was there that he established strong relationships with a number of Palestinian jihadi ideologues. Zarqawi, originally from Jordan, was a veteran Afghan-Arab who later established a training camp, with bin Laden's permission, in Herat, Afghanistan under Taliban rule.

Zarqawi, a notorious criminal and bootlegger, was first radicalized by Tablighi Jamaat, an Islamist missionary group based in Lahore that officially rejects violence as a proselytizing tool. The second influence was Abu Mohammad al-Maqdisi, a Jordanian cleric of Palestinian descent, who mentored Zarqawi while both served prison sentences in the 1990s; Maqdisi on charges of sedition, and Zarqawi on charges of theft. Maqdisi was the one who convinced Zarqawi to join the mujahedeen in Afghanistan.

Al-Qaeda, on the other hand, was launched in Pakistan in the aftermath of the Soviet-Afghan War (1979-89). ISIS, though formerly part of al-Qaeda, is still a newcomer to the rich jihadist landscape of Pakistan. Despite this disadvantage, ISIS is determined to dethrone al-Qaeda from the global jihad leadership in general and Pakistan in particular. Al-Qaeda, unsurprisingly, under the leadership of Ayman al-Zawahiri, has no intention of surrendering its place and recently launched a local chapter in the Indian Subcontinent. Both organizations are now competing intensely to lure new recruits and embrace the breakaway members of Pakistani jihadist organizations into its fold. While Al-Qaeda was once the sole supremo of all jihadist organizations in Pakistan, it has watched a number of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) commanders join ISIS's ranks.

ISIS, of course, is embracing the plethora of jihadi groups seeking to join or pledge loyalty to its franchise.

Despite the many defections and pledges to ISIS by Islamist terrorist groups previously aligned with al-Qaeda, al-Qaeda in Pakistan is still working to maintain its sphere of influence in the country. In a move to reinvigorate its

South Asia theater, al-Qaeda established al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) in September 2014 with Asim Umar, a veteran jihadi of Indian origin, as its Emir (something unusual in the Arab-dominated Al-Qaeda). Ayman al-Zawahiri appeared alongside Asim Umar in the video message establishing the new chapter, asserting his continued control of al-Qaeda's affairs.

Yet despite all this, the future prospects for ISIS in Pakistan are rich. Scores of al-Qaeda's high-profile leaders were either killed in US drone strikes in Pakistan or arrested by law enforcement. The ensuing leadership crisis - coupled with their ability to attract fresh recruits, particularly educated ones, and establish a rudimentary network - has propelled ISIS's gains in Pakistan. The ISIS jihadi brand image is selling much better than that of its al-Qaeda parent for a number of reasons.

Notably, ISIS controls a territory and population, is considerably richer, has more experienced militants in its ranks, runs training camps in areas under its control, and has been able to gain strong footholds in Afghanistan, Libya, the Sinai, and Nigeria. Most importantly, it has carved out territories from two countries and declared an Islamic caliphate in Syria and Iraq, the ultimate goal of jihadists. Therefore, the affections toward ISIS among Pakistani jihadists are growing, with more militants likely to join in the near future. By the same token, Pakistan appeals to ISIS for the same reasons it appealed to al-Qaeda: nuclear assets, a large youth population, growing radicalism, a plethora of smaller jihadi organizations from which it could recruit seasoned fighters, and above all, the fragile nature of the state.

It is evident from the fact that Pakistani authorities are now feeling a bit more uneasy that ISIS is slowly but surely growing its network in Pakistan. Al-Qaeda is also feeling disturbed. The surfacing of ISIS in Pakistan has forced al-Qaeda to try to reinvigorate itself and compete with ISIS on the same level of ruthlessness and ferocity. ISIS is all set to take advantage of Pakistan's rich and fertile jihadi landscape and could utilize the strong recruitment bases as successfully as al-Qaeda did. It will be interesting to see if and how Pakistan manages to contain ISIS's rapid growth while countering a jealous al-Qaeda at the same time. ❖

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