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The Evolving Jihad in South Asia

Jihadists in the region are adapting to a changing landscape.

By Arif Rafiq

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Relations between Islamabad and Kabul have taken a turn for the better in recent months. Though it's unclear whether the positive momentum can be sustained, strong ties between the neighboring Muslim states pose an existential threat to some jihadist groups in the region, which benefit from the patronage and weakness of both countries. As a result, Pakistani Taliban factions are closing ranks; al-Qaeda aims to subvert peace talks between Kabul and the Afghan Taliban; and jihadists connected to the Islamic State appear to be seeking to establish a foothold in the region through sectarian violence.

Burying the Hatchet?

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's assumption of power last fall marked the end of the toxic Hamid Karzai era, providing Kabul and Islamabad with an opportunity for a fresh start in bilateral relations. Ghani has been keen to be on the good side of the Pakistani military. Toward this goal, he has distanced his government from India and reversed support for Pakistani Taliban factions based in Afghanistan.

The improvement in Islamabad-Kabul ties accelerated after the December 2014 massacre at a school in Peshawar, perpetrated by the Afghanistan-based Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

Kabul and Islamabad now engage in unprecedented intelligence sharing and coordination along their shared border.

Prior to Ghani taking power, the Pakistan Army launched Operation Zarb-e Azb in North Waziristan, which has largely cleared the tribal area of militants who actively target both Afghanistan and Pakistan. And Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence has stepped up efforts to bring the Afghan Taliban to the negotiation table.

Reconsolidation

Coordinated military action by Pakistani, Afghan, and coalition forces is driving Pakistani Taliban factions back together. Earlier this month, Ehsanullah Ehsan, the spokesman of the TTP's Jamaat-ul Ahrar splinter group (TTP-JA) announced that the faction will rejoin the TTP under a new leadership council.

The TTP was founded in 2007 as an umbrella for Pakistani militant groups fighting against Islamabad. In 2014, the TTP unraveled as latent divisions were deepened by the decision of the group's leader, Maulvi Fazlullah, to engage in peace talks with Islamabad. Disaffected members of the TTP formed the TTP-JA last August. But by the year's end, both TTP and TTP-JA commanders found themselves to be the targets of airstrikes by Pakistani, Afghan, and coalition forces along the border of Afghanistan's Nangarhar province and Pakistan's Khyber Agency. In one notable incident last December, Ghani approved a U.S. drone strike on the Pakistani Taliban in Afghanistan based on intelligence provided by Pakistan.

The trilateral cooperation against the TTP and TTP-JA marks a reversal of fortunes for the terror groups, whose commanders had counted on Afghanistan as a safe haven since 2009, receiving support from elements of the Afghan state.

While the Pakistani military is attempting to nudge the Afghan Taliban to the negotiation table, al-Qaeda is trying to leverage its connections among Pakistani religious scholars to pull the Afghan Taliban back. Al-Qaeda's South Asia affiliate (AQIS) released a statement on February 21 calling on Pakistan's religious scholars to thwart the Afghan peace process. It said that the Pakistan Army was conspiring with the United States to defeat the Afghan Taliban through talks, as it has failed to neutralize them on the battlefield.

AQIS is led by Maulana Asim Umar, a scholar from the Sunni subsect known as the Deobandis. Many or most AQIS commanders come from Harkatul Jihad al-Islami, a leading Deobandi militant group. And the Afghan Taliban and most other militant groups in the region are Deobandi.

But the Pakistani military appears to have pacified the country's Deobandi lobby, moving forward with wide-ranging military operations in North Waziristan and police action across the country. Leading Deobandi figures in Pakistan are likely to be on board for a peaceful end to the Afghan Taliban insurgency.

Meanwhile, al-Qaeda's efforts to regain influence in the region have fallen short. Many of its commanders have been killed in drone attacks in Pakistan or by Pakistani police and paramilitary operations in urban areas. While al-Qaeda may have helped negotiate this month's merger of Pakistani Taliban factions, the groups will find it difficult to thrive without safe havens in North Waziristan and eastern Afghanistan.

A Niche for the Islamic State?

In January, the Islamic State (IS) officially recognized the *wilayah* (province) of Khurasan – a region that encompasses Afghanistan; parts, if not all, of Pakistan; and may extend into neighboring countries. The entity is largely notional. Its commanders hold control of little terrain. But since its formation, there has been a spate of sectarian attacks in Afghanistan. Dozens of Afghan Hazara Shias have been kidnapped in three separate incidents since January. And there have been two attacks on Sunni Sufis, including an attack by a team of gunmen that killed eleven at a Sufi center Kabul.

While no group has claimed responsibility for these attacks, individuals sympathetic to or part of IS-Khurasan could be responsible. Sectarian attacks, while common in Pakistan, are relatively rare in Afghanistan. The Afghan Taliban, which hosted the anti-Shia terrorist group Lashkar-e Jhangvi during the 1990s and massacred Hazara Shias, has gone out of its way in recent years to condemn or distance itself from attacks on the Shia.

The Hazara kidnappings may be the work of criminal networks posing as militants in order to extort Shia travellers en route from Iran. But a more probable explanation is that IS-Khurasan is creating a niche for itself in the region by engaging in sectarian violence in Afghanistan. Attacking the Shia would provide it with a means to gain visibility and work toward its primary objectives without stepping on the toes of the Afghan Taliban.

At the same time, by engaging in sectarian attacks, IS-Khurasan may cause Afghans to bandwagon against it. IS-Khurasan's leadership has been hit hard by U.S. drone attacks. The senior-most Afghan in IS-Khurasan, Abdul Rauf Khadim, was killed in a drone strike in February. His deputy, Hafiz Waheed, may have been killed in a drone strike in early March. At ease at which the United States is obtaining actionable intelligence on IS commanders in Afghanistan perhaps indicates a local desire to weed out the group in its infancy.

In the wake of the recent kidnappings, some Hazara Shia elders in one region of Afghanistan met with local Taliban commanders to gain their protection from IS-Khurasan. While some Afghan Shias may be exploring protection deals with the Afghan Taliban, others may choose a third option for their defense: Iran. A small militia in northern Afghanistan is suspected of having Iranian support.

Iran has publicized the deaths of Hazara Shias from Afghanistan (albeit settled as refugees in Iran) who have died fighting against IS and other Sunni jihadists in Iraq and Syria. In response, we may see IS-Khurasan not just target Hazara Shias and other Shia communities in Afghanistan, but also attempt to strike Iranian personnel and interests in the country. It could opt

to use these fighters in Afghanistan. Iran, emboldened by its success in the Middle East, could take a more aggressive posture in Afghanistan.