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Afghan Taliban's IS Dilemma

By Abdul Basit

Synopsis

Islamic State's (IS) growing influence in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region coupled with the pressure on the Afghan Taliban to reconcile with Kabul has put the Taliban leadership in a quandary. A political compromise with the government can divide the jihadist group, which will benefit IS in the region.

Commentary

WITH THE emergence of the self-styled Islamic State's (IS) local affiliate, the Khurasan Shura in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the jihadist landscape in the two countries has become a highly contested domain. At present, the Af-Pak militant landscape is undergoing operational and ideological transformation as different militant outfits make strategic and tactical positional adjustments to these shifting-sands. Although operationally and tactically, it is Al-Qaeda and Afghan Taliban-led, ideologically and strategically, it is an IS-inspired landscape.

IS' military victories in Iraq and Syria, the near-global appeal of its self-proclaimed Islamic caliphate and its monopoly over the contemporary jihadist terrorist iconography resonate with the jihadist groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban, who have been at the vanguard of Jihadism in the Af-Pak region, are in an unprecedented tug of war with IS. The pro-IS allegiances and defections are at the heart of this evolving competition. The trend seems to be growing as more and more jihadists, particular from among the younger generation, have demonstrated pro-IS inclinations.

Al-Qaeda and Taliban's response to IS in Af-Pak

In September 2014, Al-Qaeda Central launched its South Asian branch, Al-Qaeda in South Asia (AQIS), to retain the loyalties of the jihadist groups in the region. However, in these eight months, AQIS has been fairly subdued, to say nothing of its attempts or capacity to carry out attacks. In fact, in an audio message in April 2015, AQIS spokesman Usama Mehmood admitted to losing more than 50 leaders and operatives in the US drone strikes in Afghanistan-Pakistan border areas, including its deputy head Ustad Ahmad Farooq.

The Afghan Taliban's fading grip in the face of IS' growing influence compelled it to mobilise a special unit entitled "recruitment commission" to reach out to militant factions who have defected to IS. At the same time, questions have been asked about Mullah Umar's whereabouts, life-status and the ability

to manage the group. In response, the Afghan Taliban issued Umar's biography to mitigate these rumours. However, the move backfired.

The younger jihadist generation refused to believe the authenticity of the written biography. It further objected on the grounds that periodically, Al-Qaeda chief Ayman Al-Zawahiri and IS' leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi have appeared in videos, so Mullah Umar should do the same.

At present, the Afghan Taliban leadership is divided over the issue of peace talks with the Afghan government. While the senior leadership strives for a political settlement with Kabul, the younger generation jihadists, which comprise the field commanders and fighters, are furiously opposed to the idea. The younger generation of the Afghan Taliban believes that after 13 years of fight, a political compromise would tantamount to wasting its sacrifices and constitutes essentially, a blatant disregard to those who had laid down their lives.

In the circumstances, any pursuit of a political settlement by senior leaders will trigger splintering within the Taliban ranks. Those who want to continue fighting for ideological or war-profiteering reasons will defect to IS. Indeed, this presents a unique and unprecedented challenge to the Afghan Taliban.

Overcoming the hurdles of Aqeedah and Bay'ah to join IS

Apparently, *aqeedah* (doctrines of faith) and *bay'ah* (oath of fealty to the Afghan Taliban) had been the two major hurdles in the way of younger jihadist generation who looked up to the IS. The Baghdadi-led group follows Salafi-Takfirism, an extreme form of Sunni Wahhabism, while the Afghan Taliban adopts Deobandi-Hanafism, a form of Sunnism organic in parts of South Asia.

Within the jihadist community, reneging one's allegiance is considered so illegitimate as to invite religious censure in the form of a death penalty. But the 13-year long public absence of Mullah Umar and success of IS model have provided the younger generation of jihadists with the religious rationalisation as a way out. For instance, before joining IS, the spokesperson of the Uzbek militant group in Afghanistan, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), issued a statement which maintained: "Mullah Omar has not been seen for some 13 years and he can no longer be the leader in accordance with Islamic Sharia."

The younger generation of neo-jihadists in Af-Pak is less consumed by the doctrinal baggage and has leaned towards Salafist-Takfiri practices. To this group of jihadists, the attraction of serving the so-called Islamic caliphate -- that ostensibly re-enacts a purist Islamic social order -- outweighs any apparent doctrinal barriers. And it merits mention that the shift has taken place against the backdrop of a rapid evolving social milieu of intense Salafisation of Sunni identity in South Asia. Pertinently, there has been much confluence between Sunnism as practised in South Asia and Salafism.

Additionally, the Afghan Taliban's approach of limiting their agenda to Afghanistan has also disillusioned the younger neo-jihadists. In their eyes, the Taliban are a mere political grouping who instrumentalise Jihad as a religious cover to restore their toppled government by the 2001 US invasion. They believe the Afghan Talibans are overly exercised by their petty political interests, and detrimentally in the process, ignore the larger and more substantial issues confronting the Ummah (global Muslim community), which IS addresses adequately in its propaganda messages.

Changing the entire landscape?

If IS can sustain the momentum of its success in Syria and Iraq, its appeal will further grow among the jihadist groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan. This will make it further difficult for the Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda to retain their support in the region.

The downplaying of the IS threat by the national governments in Afghanistan and Pakistan is fraught with danger. Left unchecked, the pro-IS defections and allegiances will develop to play a dangerous role in the future. So far, the defections have come from the marginalised elements of the Taliban.

Indeed, a major defection in future will change the complexion of the entire landscape. Such allegiances should be treated as an indicator of a growing IS influence. In future, the pace and scale

of these trends will allow the governments to estimate how much traction the IS message is gaining in the region.

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