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ISIS in Afghanistan: A Growing Threat to Pakistan?

By Sara Mahmood

Synopsis

The ISIS chapter in Afghanistan has emerged as an imminent threat to the region, specifically after it gained control of areas in the Nangarhar province. The province's critical location along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and the group's readiness to feed demand for narcotics trade grant it strength.

Commentary

SINCE JULY this year, the ISIS chapter in Afghanistan has taken control of seven districts in the southern part of the Nangarhar province. The province is located along the east of Afghanistan, and borders Pakistan. The control of physical territories indicates that the group is no longer on the fringes of the region. The group has established Shariah courts and prisons, closed down more than 60 educational institutions and recruited local children into its ranks of militants. It has also released barbaric videos aimed at terrorising those who stand up to their violent penchant for control and have perpetrated incidents of violence in the province.

The Pashtun population has been largely resistant to ISIS' recruitment efforts, and has fended off the terrorist group's attempts at enforcing a foothold in the areas under its control. Yet, the ISIS chapter in Afghanistan has managed to carve out areas for control and has been involved in door-to-door recruitment campaigns while they forcibly marry local women to its fighters. According to a recent UN Report, the entity has managed to gain supporters from 25 of the 34 provinces in the country. These developments indicate that ISIS in Afghanistan has become a more pressing threat to stability within the country, and Pakistan as well.

Nangarhar's strategic location

ISIS' foothold at the border with Pakistan is of strategic significance to the politics of the region. Firstly, the location represents a passage for transit trade and trade with Pakistan, along the Kabul River Valley, connecting Kabul to Peshawar in Pakistan. In this current period of post-US withdrawal, Afghanistan is in the throes of the early stages of state re-building. It requires economic revival, which can result in part through trade with Pakistan. Moreover, Pakistan is the country's largest trading partner and the neighbour has been Afghanistan's second largest export market in the past. ISIS could leverage on its foothold and take control of the trading routes to disrupt economic ties between the two countries.

Secondly, Nangarhar province borders the porous Durand Line – that separates Pakistan from Afghanistan – which provides an easy passageway for the movement of militants. Residents from the province have routinely travelled to Pakistan to seek medical care, job opportunities and meet family members on the other side. The ISIS militants could move along the same route to conduct attacks in Pakistan and market pro-ISIS propaganda. ISIS does not recognise the existence of this border. In fact, in a recent attack on a Pakistani security forces check-post along the Durand Line, ISIS denounced the territorial separation between both nations.

Afghanistan has continued to blame Pakistan for not cracking down on the Taliban and Haqqani network insurgents operating from Pakistan. Similarly, Pakistan has pointed fingers at Afghanistan in the past, and recently for the attack at the Badaber Air Force camp in Peshawar. This blame game is bound to escalate as ISIS members conduct related attacks in Pakistan that will further pit the two countries against each other.

A substantial aspect of Nangarhar's strategic importance to ISIS rests in local drug production. Nangarhar was the country's second largest opium poppy producer until a massive 96% decrease was reported in 2008, making it Afghanistan's success story. However, by 2014, opium production in Nangarhar increased by 16%, turning it into the fourth largest opium producer in the country. In addition to opium, heroin and hashish are being produced. ISIS could capitalise on the production of these drugs, whilst expanding existing cultivation of opium in the province.

Furthermore, the illicit drug trade in the country is deeply entrenched and prevalent, facilitated by the porous borders on the east. In the past, the drug trafficking industry represented close to half of the Afghan Taliban's financial network. Similarly, ISIS in Afghanistan's Nangarhar province points towards exploitation of the drug smuggling industry.

Exploiting porous Af-Pak border

Despite extending and maintaining solid control in various parts of Nangarhar, ISIS has struggled to make a mark internally. Prior loyalties and commitments to groups like the Haqqani network and Afghan Taliban have staved off ISIS' approach from gaining traction. However, despite this setback, the group has an estimated 3,500 members, and is relying on a growing number of defections from the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban to form its support base and membership.

Since July, the US has stepped up its drone strikes in the province. Similarly, the Afghan National Army (ANA) has launched operations in a district with strong ISIS presence. Still it bears amplifying that these kinetic efforts will not have a lasting impact in a province that is home to the notorious Tora Bora caves that provided refuge for Osama Bin Laden before he escaped to Abbottabad. The ISIS members will easily seek shelter in the widespread mountainous regions and resurface after the military operation. Moreover, the Afghan forces will not be able to effectively counter the presence of ISIS due to resource overstretch.

Threat to Pakistan-Afghanistan relations

Moreover, the cross-border infiltration coupled with the precarious location of the province indicates that any efforts to dismantle the physical sanctuary of the group will be futile. The members and supporters can easily seek safe-haven in Pakistan faced with military efforts to hamper its operational visibility only to return whenever the incursions pass.

ISIS in Afghanistan will gain ground beyond the physical sanctuary in Nangarhar province in terms of increased support from defectors and further attacks within the country and in Pakistan. Possible capitalisation of the drug trafficking industry will strengthen the group financially and make it more capable to conduct high intensity attacks on sensitive targets.

ISIS' activities will strain Pak-Afghan relations, leading to an escalation of violence in the territory it controls. However, while the group's members simply represent a rebranding of militants with limited local following, the increase in actors, alongside the Afghan Taliban and Pakistani Taliban, will lead to further instability for the country and the region.

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