

## Daesh in Pakistan and Afghanistan: The Militant Marketplace Model

Julian Richards, University of Buckingham<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** In recent months, the Daesh (Islamic State) organisation has opened and new front and started to make its presence felt in the Afghanistan/Pakistan region, most notably in the shape of a number of terror attacks against Shia and other targets. Questions are increasingly being asked in the region about whether this is a passing phase, or a worrying and more permanent development. Analysts are also keen to establish how Daesh interacts with other, established militant groups in the region, in terms of causing splits and rifts in such groups as the “Pakistani Taliban” and the Ahl-e Hadees strand of militancy. Other key questions include how Daesh in the South Asia region reflects a strategic shift in global Daesh strategy more broadly, and the question of to which constituencies the group may target itself and gain support in the region. A “militant marketplace” model is proposed, which both helps to identify and describe how the group may fit into the complex and crowded picture of militancy in the Afghanistan/Pakistan region; and helps with assessments of how Daesh might fare in the coming months and years.

### Introduction

The emergence of Islamic State (or Daesh) in South Asia is not without some historical and ideological rationale. It is alleged that the Prophet Muhammad once proclaimed<sup>2</sup>:

*When you see that black flags have appeared from Khurasan then join them because Allah’s Khalifa [messenger of God] Mahdi will be among them.*

This is indeed the rationale for black being the colour of many Islamist groups’ flags and emblems, and the colour of turbans and other clothing favoured by the likes of the Taliban and IS. Khurasan (or Khorasan), meanwhile, is claimed by many Islamist ideologues to be a province of debatable size and definition covering much of central and South Asia, from the eastern borders of Iran through to

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<sup>1</sup> Co-director of the Centre for Security and Intelligence Studies (BUCSIS), University of Buckingham: [Julian.richards@buckingham.ac.uk](mailto:Julian.richards@buckingham.ac.uk)

<sup>2</sup> <http://dailyhadith.adaptivesolutionsinc.com/hadith/Black-Flags-from-Khorasan-are-Mahdi%E2%80%99s.htm> accessed 20 March 2018

eastern India and large parts of western China. Present-day Afghanistan and Pakistan sit at the heart of the claimed province.

When Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared himself the Caliph of all Muslims from the Zengi Mosque in Mosul in 2014, a number of splinter groups in and around the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan declared their allegiance to him. These included splinter factions of the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), some of whom are opposed to involvement in peace talks or otherwise at odds with the leadership of the core TTP; the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) who had previously been aligned to al-Qaeda; and some smaller Pakistan-based groups such as Jahmat-e Ahrar and Jundullah.

Over the following year, Islamic State (IS) fighters established a physical presence in Afghanistan's eastern Nangarhar province, and conducted intensive leafletting and communications targeted primarily at universities and colleges of Pakistan's major cities. In January 2015, the Khurasan Chapter of Islamic State was formally declared. Approximately 18 months later, the group carried out its first major attack in the Afghan capital, Kabul, directed at a procession of Hazara Shias; and in April 2017, the US dropped its controversial Mother of all Bombs (MOAB) on an alleged IS complex in Achin, Nangarhar, killing an unspecified number of militants. By now, the group had become generally known as IS-KP, or Islamic State Khurasan Province.

### **The militant marketplace model**

The militant scene in Pakistan and Afghanistan is a crowded environment, with a number of groups active, relating to a range of political, ideological and regional interests. Many of these groups have been operating for many years and are fairly entrenched, whether it is in the sparsely-populated and mountainous Tribal Areas on the border between the two states, or in Pakistan's sprawling urban metropolises. Some of the groups in the region allegedly receive patronage from the Pakistani state as strategic assets, while others are targeted as "terrorist groups". At first glance, this might seem like a particularly challenging environment for a newcomer such as IS to penetrate.

It could be proposed that a potentially useful analogy for such an environment might be constituted by a crowded and complex marketplace in which a trader wishes to establish a new following, since all militant groups in the region will be competing for an essentially finite supply of recruits and fighters.

Coles and Smith explain that "marketplaces speed up the rate at which traders find each other" (Coles and Smith, 1998, p.239). Thus, the core aim of the marketplace is to help match traders with their markets and vice versa.

Normative views in Terrorism Studies tell us that all militant groups need a constituency in order to survive. Militant groups are affected by the degree of competition they face for support (Bloom, 2005, p.95). It has hitherto become generally accepted that competition leads to spiralling levels of violence as groups attempt to outbid each other (Nemeth, 2014, 337). The traditional view was that groups who could demonstrate greater levels of violence could enhance their recruitment and sustainability (Crenshaw, 1985). This might be particularly so for religiously inspired groups, for whom fanaticism may be a critical recruitment and support factor.

Evidence suggests this may be supported by IS's early activity in the region, with their attacks showing higher-than-average fatalities; a greater propensity to use suicide attackers and a sectarian nature in target selection (Hastings and Naz, 2017, 347), as exemplified by the aforementioned July 2016 attack in Kabul on a Hazara demonstration that killed 80 and wounded more than 230 people<sup>3</sup>. This attack held great symbolic significance, being as it was at the heart of the Afghan state, and on what might have been considered the Taliban's stamping ground.

However, as Young and Duggan observe<sup>4</sup>:

“..while a competitive environment may encourage terrorism, it also likely dampens group survival as other organisations drain the pool of potential recruits. Thus, similar to interest groups operating in competitive environments, some will succeed and some will fail”.

It might also be the case that, in environments where there are many competing groups in the same market, rather like the situation with public goods, there might be opportunities for some groups to free-ride on the contributions of others (Nemeth, 2014, 338). In a terrorism context, examples of this could include IS claiming responsibility for attacks which were not necessarily authored by them, but which draw support away from other groups. More pertinently, there was much evidence through 2014 that the main elements pledging allegiance to IS in Pakistan were splinter factions of the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) group, who had fallen out of favour with the TTP leadership and may have been primarily motivated by short term hedging and political expediency rather than a particular desire to follow IS. Such free-riders would not have advanced IS's cause particularly.

At the same time, we need to think about the variability of markets, and the notion of “niche” and “specialist” markets. Not all traders in the marketplace are targeting exactly the same constituencies, and it would be simplistic to view support for militant groups as monolithic. It may be the case that a new militant group may be able to address a specific market in a way that previous suppliers did not

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/23/hazara-minority-targeted-by-suicide-bombs-at-kabul-protest>

<sup>4</sup> Young and Duggan; <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/334/html>

really satisfy. This can work both within a strand of ideology (such as religion), or across different and competing ideologies.

In the case of the former, consider the decline of church attendance in traditional and conservative parish churches in Britain, and the parallel rise in attendance – especially by younger parishioners – of more evangelistic and apostolic churches<sup>5</sup>. Similarly, within British Islam there is some evidence that more global, millennial and metropolitan ideas are becoming more popular with younger Muslims at the expense of traditional, conservative expressions of religion rooted in former postcolonial societies of declining relevance to those born in the West (Richards, 2017, 46).

Conversely, political movements can sometimes completely reorient a constituency. In Karachi in the mid-1980s, for example, support among the Urdu-speaking community for the religious party, Jamaat-I Islami, largely collapsed on the arrival of the new ethnic identity-oriented MQM party, which championed identity politics in nationalist rather than religious terms (Richards 2007). Similarly, in more recent times, many parts of post-industrial Europe have seen the emergence of new, populist parties that have broken the traditional battle-lines of right and left in favour of generalised populism that offers to take politics in new ideological directions (Kitschelt, 2004, 1). Within the marketplace, such developments can have the effect of splitting overall votes to such an extent that no single party profits, and complex and precarious coalitions have to be formed.

Within these shifting developments, it is also worth noting temporal, as well as spatial factors. Politics and religion are just two areas in which younger generations may diverge from older ones in their tastes and preferences. Indeed, we are reminded of Gramsci's notion of the pervasive "radicalism of youth" (Bates, 1975, 361). In this way, the supply of militancy in the marketplace and the processes of competition between groups should not be seen as a static thing, but – rather as with business – there will always be a need to innovate and move with trends, lest an organisation finds itself to be yesterday's news. A fine and relevant example of this may be the way in which Islamic State has managed to eclipse Al Qaeda within the young militant marketplace in recent years, by out-bidding its forebear in the violence stakes<sup>6</sup>.

With all of this in mind, the emergence of Islamic State in the South Asia region could be characterised as an attempt by a new supplier of Islamist militancy to muscle-in to the regional militant marketplace.

The hypotheses may be presented. Firstly, if IS finds itself competing in an essentially finite and highly competitive market, it may find it difficult to gain traction against established militant groups with

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<sup>5</sup> See <https://faithsurvey.co.uk/uk-christianity.html>

<sup>6</sup> Malik et al, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/10/how-isis-crippled-al-qaida>

loyal support. However, if it is targeting new or niche portions of the market, it might be able to carve out a successful presence.

The second situation concerns the effect on the level of violence in the region. Traditional thinking suggests that violence could worsen, as new and existing groups attempt to outbid each other in their radicalism. Conversely, however, if IS manages to outbid existing groups for recruits, either by free-riding on their attacks, or by drawing support away, there could be a reduction in the incidences of violence, or at least no particular spike in violence, as IS merely manages to supplant existing groups and maintain the existing level of attacks.

### **Conspiracy theories**

It is worth considering that a conscious insertion of a competitor within the marketplace can cause groups to turn on one another in their battle for supremacy, and thus become more inward-looking. In Pakistan and Afghanistan, there is evidence that IS has tried to gain traction by picking up dissident and splinter elements from the other groups, although this may only have had the effect of rallying support and unity for the main groups in fighting the dissidents (Hastings and Naz, 2017, 336-7).

From an external perspective, there could be seen to be merit in distracting the main groups from their mission and forcing them to concentrate on competing with the newcomers on the ground. This could be a particular concern for the Taliban in Afghanistan, for example. It might also explain why theories have circulated in some quarters of covert support for the newly arriving IS as a means of diverting the Taliban's energies, as former Afghan President Hamid Karzai has openly alleged on RT News<sup>7</sup>. The veracity of such claims, which include allegations of IS receiving helicopters and other military supplies from the US and covertly using their bases in the region, should be taken with a big pinch of salt, although incidences of state support for militant groups in the region are not completely mythical. The generally accepted view, for example, is that the Afghan Taliban were created and mobilised by the Pakistani intelligence agency, the ISI, for strategic purposes, and that other militant groups such as the Haqqani group are openly supported by them as proxy forces in the regional conflict.

### **The regional militant marketplace**

To progress this analysis, it may be helpful to examine the shape and nature of the militant marketplace in the region. This could be delineated across six categories:

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RqOPqjGB0x4>

- Militant groups focused primarily on the conflict with India over Kashmir, including such groups as Jaish-e Mohamed (JeM), Lashkar-e Toiba (LeT) and Hizb-ul Mujahideen (HUM)
- Extreme sectarian groups, most (although not all) of whom are anti-Shia and anti-Ahmediyya, such as Sipah-e Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) and Lashkar-e Jhangvi (LeJ)
- The “Pakistani Taliban” (Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan; TTP) whose primary focus is the establishment of an Islamic state in Pakistan
- The Afghan Taliban, sometimes referred to as the Quetta Shura
- The remnants of al-Qaeda and its affiliates, such as Jundullah and IMU, both of whom briefly switched their allegiance to IS in 2014 but appear to have switched back
- Tribal militias and regional militias, such as the Haqqani group, most of which are based in the Tribal Areas.

Overlaid on this picture are religious differences, such as Deobandi groups (which applies to the Taliban in both countries and various other tribal and regional militias; Sunni Barelvi groups (such as LeJ); and Ahl-e Hadees (broadly similar to Salafism) groups such as LeT. It is also worth noting that religious politics in Pakistan not only includes militant groups, but Islamist political parties and movements, some of whom have links with militias.

Religious and historical differences mean that different groups will have different objectives. LeT, for example, is almost entirely focused on the regional struggle with India and is not interested in causing trouble within Pakistan itself, which is largely why it is used by the deep Pakistani state as a strategic proxy. Similarly, the Afghan Taliban is primarily interested in Afghanistan and not in the global jihad, while the Pakistani Taliban is focused on gaining central power in Pakistan (and making it an Islamic state). Al-Qaeda and IS-related groups, however, are simultaneously interested in establishing the global Caliphate (of which Khurasan will be a part) and in fomenting *takfiri* sectarianism. Some of these factors also complicate the possibility of allegiance to al-Baghdadi. The Afghan Taliban, for example, initially pledged their allegiance to Mullah Omar as their Emir, and this means they cannot easily switch their allegiance to a newly-declared Caliph, not least one who does even live within the region.

### **Terrorist activity**

As described above, the arrival of IS in the region (and the shift of allegiance of some local groups in the early stages) did lead to IS-authored terrorist attacks, some of which were large and audacious. However, closer analysis suggests that the group has not yet managed to establish a strong presence within the regional marketplace, despite the eye-catching nature of some of its attacks. This may in part be down to the difficulties of muscling-in to an already crowded marketplace, although it is worth noting that its arrival has broadly coincided with a major anti-terrorism drive by the Pakistani army in

the tribal areas. This has seen considerable military resources thrown into such areas as North and South Waziristan, with considerable displacement of citizens resulting, not to mention considerable casualties on both military and militant sides.

Analysis of data concerning terrorist attacks, as derived from the START database and depicted in Figure 1 below, sheds light on the situation.

**Table 1. Terrorist activity in Afghanistan and Pakistan, 2012–15 (START 2016).**

Year	All attacks in Afghanistan	Attacks by ISIS-linked groups in Afghanistan	All attacks in Pakistan	Attacks by ISIS-linked groups in Pakistan
2012	1469	0	1652	3
2013	1441	0	2213	4
2014	1820	0	2147	34
2015	1926	59	1235	27

Note: ISIS-related attacks are defined as those carried out by the Khorasan Chapter of the Islamic State, Jundallah, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Jamaat-ul-Ahrar or Tehrik-e-Khilafat in the Global Terrorism Database.

Here, we can see that IS-authored attacks started to appear on the scene in 2015 in Afghanistan, and earlier in Pakistan. The numbers of such attacks were not inconsiderable, amounting to 59 in Afghanistan in 2015 and 27 across the border in Pakistan. However, when these numbers are placed within the overall context of terrorist activity, they remain very low, with IS-authored attacks accounting for just over 3 percent of all attacks in Afghanistan in 2015. In Pakistan, meanwhile, we can see that IS-authored attacks rose considerably between 2013 and 2014, but have then fallen away again somewhat in 2015. In the broader scene, all terrorist attacks in Pakistan have declined in number steadily after 2013.

Three key conclusions could be drawn from these figures. First, major counter-terrorism operations in Pakistan after 2013 do appear to be having the effect of reducing the overall number of attacks and making the environment generally more hostile for all militant groups in the country. Secondly, such operations may have pushed IS and their affiliates over the border into Afghanistan, where they have become more active. Finally and perhaps most importantly, IS-authored attacks have so far represented a very small proportion of overall attacks in both countries, and this may mean that the group is struggling to establish any sort of presence in the militant marketplace at the time of writing.

### **Conclusions: opportunities and risks for IS in Afghanistan and Pakistan**

As the literature on failing and failing states attests (a description which could be applied variously to both Afghanistan and Pakistan) opportunities are presented to terrorist groups in regions of weak or absent state authority. This has always been a factor in the Tribal Areas. Further opportunities are

presented by fractious and competitive politics in the regional marketplace in allowing a new arrival to pick up disenchanted splinter groups and gain their allegiance. This, in turn, provides the new arrival with a ready-made army of trained and radicalised foot-soldiers ready to mount operations on the ground.

A new arrival with a fresh new vision could also be attractive to constituencies who may feel less motivated by existing groups. This may be why IS has consciously targeted younger and more educated millennials in major Pakistani cities, and especially in the universities and colleges. As has been the case in Western countries, IS may be able to find a niche to some extent in militant recruits who are motivated not by existing groups with a faded and “provincial” outlook, but by a fresher, more radical and more 21<sup>st</sup>-century global and millennial vision. This could, in turn, attract an international stream of recruits, and the ideology of Khurasan could give the whole process a perceived intellectual and theological legitimacy.

However, Hastings and Naz (2017, 340) have suggested that, while IS has tried to innovate in Pakistan/Afghanistan by offering a more internationalist and millennial vision backed up with a commitment to extreme violence, this may actually not be attractive to the majority of the militant constituency in the region, which is more interested in local and regional concerns such as the fate of Afghanistan itself and fighting India over Kashmir. It may be highly indicative, for example, that Pakistanis and Afghans were notable by their absence in the figures of foreign fighters travelling to Iraq and Syria, for example, especially when compared to fighters travelling from other parts of the Middle East and North Africa (Hastings and Naz, 2017, 336). Indeed, while university-educated individuals are a constituency who may find IS attractive intellectually, the region is generally one with low levels of urbanisation and education. Here, many militant recruits may find they are little more than cannon-fodder for the new group.

In terms of splinter groups pledging allegiance to IS, marketplaces are very dynamic and sometimes fickle environments, and it may be indicative that some of the earlier allies of IS in the region have since denounced them. This could be because militant politics – like all politics to an extent – is an environment of tactical hedging and shifting allegiance. The arrival of IS might be convenient for some at a certain stage, but not later. Indeed, it may be the case that most groups in the region are motivated primarily by regional issues (Afghanistan, Pakistan and India) and not by wider, global objectives brought in by people who are essentially “foreigners”.

Finally, it may be the case that excessive violence by the new arrival can actually offer opportunities to pre-existing groups, who can position themselves as the slightly more moderate and pragmatic players on the field, and who can offer themselves as potentially more significant partners for dialogue

with the regional state governments. This may be a factor in the Taliban's latest efforts to participate in the Oslo-based process of political dialogue on the future of Afghanistan.

Whether the opportunities or risks prove more significant for IS in the region in the long run, analysis may be aided by borrowing some ideas from economics when considering a complex, crowded and dynamic militant marketplace, such as the militant scene in Afghanistan and Pakistan.