

Is Pakistan in ISIS' Crosshairs?

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Pakistan has long been home to international terrorists—including al-Qaeda and the masterminds of 9/11—as well as the Taliban and numerous other Islamist militant groups. Militants are a fundamental component of the country’s foreign policy, and Pakistan’s army and intelligence organizations have developed a virtual zoo of Islamist militants of varying creeds to conduct

operations in India and Afghanistan. Coupled with Pakistan's history of nuclear proliferation, this makes for a toxic cocktail of concern.

Now, both the Islamic State (ISIS) and al-Qaeda are making a play for pre-eminence in the world, and control of Pakistan. Despite the recent hype, however, Pakistan remains firmly in al-Qaeda's orbit. How did Pakistan become the prize for international terrorism, what is at stake, and what—if anything—can the United States do about it?

Pakistan's Pursuit of Kashmir

As I detail in my most recent book, *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War*, Pakistan has long used militants to achieve both foreign and domestic objectives.

In the 1940s, Muhammad Ali Jinnah floated the “two-nation theory,” which held that Muslims could not live with dignity and equality within a Hindu-majority dominion, to argue for greater autonomy of Muslim-majority areas and even equal representation in a national parliament of a unified India. Ultimately, the two-nation theory became the basis for an independent and sovereign state, Pakistan, which was to be the homeland for South Asia's Muslims. Despite the fact that one third of South Asia's Muslims chose not to migrate to Pakistan and that many Muslims that became a part of Pakistan never wanted to join the new country in the first place, Pakistan's early founders remained committed to the two-nation theory, and believed that Kashmir, the only Muslim majority territory in the Raj, should have gone to Pakistan.

Kashmir, wanting to remain independent, resisted, and Pakistani tribal raiders sought to capture it by force. While Pakistan's preferred narrative is that these marauders acted on their own, [scholarship](#) on the subject shows that the militants enjoyed provincial and central government support. This began the first war between Pakistan and India over Kashmir. When the war ended on January 1, 1949, [Pakistan controlled about one third of the territory](#) while India controlled the remainder.

From 1947 onward, Pakistan's army became expert at sending non-state actors as well as military personal disguised as non-state actors to infiltrate India and Afghanistan. Over time, Pakistan's militant proxies became a mainstay of Pakistani policy in India and Afghanistan. Pakistan called their proxy fighters *mujahideen* or “holy warriors” to lend these militants religious legitimacy and galvanize popular support for their actions.

Pakistan continued to support sabotage and terrorist activities in Kashmir at a low level. In 1965, war broke out with India when Pakistan dispatched non-state actors and military forces disguised as mujahideen to seize territory in Kashmir in the hopes of sparking an insurgency. While it officially ended as a draw, we now know that India ended the war prematurely; India [could have delivered a decisive defeat](#) had India's civilian-military relations been more functional. In 1999, Pakistan dispatched mujahideen to seize territory in the Kargil sector of Kashmir. While they succeeded in seizing the territory, the gains were short lived. [Since 1990](#), Pakistan has waged a sanguinary proxy war over Kashmir. It has nurtured dozens of militant groups and tens of thousands of fighters in

hopes of forcing India to concede the rest of Kashmir.

Pakistan in Afghanistan and the Birth of the Taliban

In the 1950s, Pakistan began inserting Islamists associated with a Pakistan-based Islamist organization known as Jamaat-e-Islami into Afghanistan. In 1974, Pakistan's civilian autocratic leader, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, set up a cell within Pakistan's intelligence agency, the Inter-services Intelligence Directorate (ISI), to begin managing dissident Islamists in Afghanistan. In 1973, Sardar Mohammed Daoud Khan ousted his cousin King Zahir Shah and made himself the president of Afghanistan. As Daoud began his campaign to secularize Afghanistan, he cracked down on his Islamist opponents who, in turn, fled to Pakistan and Iran. Bhutto instructed the ISI to begin organizing an Islamist resistance into manageable groups.

When General Zia ul Haq seized the reins of power in Pakistan in 1977, he continued this policy, and began pressing the United States for support as the Soviet Union became more aggressive in Afghanistan. However, President Carter demurred. Carter's administration distrusted Zia and was more concerned about Pakistan's efforts to obtain a nuclear weapon. Carter's administration even sanctioned Pakistan in **April of 1979** for progress made in enrichment. The move complicated American efforts to work with Pakistan after the Soviet invasion, as all security assistance required a waiver of sanctions. When Carter finally came around to Zia, Zia dismissed his offer as "peanuts" and awaited a republican victory in the 1980 presidential election.

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He was right to wait; Ronald Reagan quickly took up Zia's cause. By 1982 American and Saudi money was flowing freely into Pakistan even though American assistance still required a waiver of those 1979 sanctions. As is well known, the ISI worked with the United States and Saudi Arabia to develop the mujahideen to oust the Soviets from Afghanistan. By this time, Jamaat-e-Islami had become important in fostering the growth of political Islam in Afghanistan during periods of Soviet-sponsored secularization.

But when the Soviets at last withdrew, the Americans could no longer overlook Pakistan's nuclear proliferation. In 1990, Pakistan found itself again under the sanctions that had been held in abeyance during the so-called anti-Soviet jihad. While the United States withdrew from the region, Pakistan continued to support a menagerie of Islamist groups in Afghanistan in hopes of securing a pro-Pakistan, Islamist regime in Kabul. **Pakistan put its full force behind a Pashtun Islamist named Gulbuddin Hekmatyar** who struggled with his main rival, Ahmad Shah Massoud, an ethnic Tajik from the Panjshir Valley of Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, the various madrassahs and mosques Pakistan had cultivated—with American and Saudi

assistance—to sustain the production of mujahideen continued to be a locus of Islamist activities. Here the Taliban movement was born. The Taliban began launching offensives in Afghanistan in response to the rapacity and greed evidenced by former Afghan mujahideen leaders (known more commonly among Afghans as warlords), who seemed determined to fight to the last Afghan for personal gains. Initially Afghans welcomed the Taliban as they swept through. However, as the Taliban consolidated power, they also incorporated many of the same warlords reviled by Afghans. In 1994 Pakistan, under Benazir Bhutto, shifted its support from Hekmatyar and threw its weight, money, and military supplies and trainers behind the Taliban. By 1998, the Taliban had seized control over most of the country.

Under the Taliban's watch, Pakistan relocated several Kashmiri training camps in Afghanistan. And Afghanistan continued to be a source of battle-hardened fighters for operations in Kashmir.

Al-Qaeda's Hold on Pakistan

Numerous Pakistani militant groups flocked to Afghanistan, with ISI tutelage, to support the Taliban as they fought to control the country. Groups that were once distinct began collaborating and sharing networks. Notably, many of these groups shared the Afghan Taliban's commitment to Deobandi, one of five main interpretative traditions of Islam in Pakistan. Along with the anti-Shia organizations Sipah-e-Sahaba-e-Pakistan (SSP) and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), the Harkat-ul-jihad-e-Islami (HuJI) and Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM) helped the Taliban consolidate their hold over Afghanistan in the 1990s and, through this association with the Taliban, also forged ties with al-Qaeda. Many of the attacks that have taken place in Pakistan since 2001 were imagined by al-Qaeda but executed by its Pakistani Deobandi "subcontractors," such as LeJ.

Osama bin Laden's ties to this region span decades. During the anti-Soviet jihad, he was a financier and facilitator, making numerous trips to Afghanistan and Pakistan. In 1996, he returned to Afghanistan where he would stay until 2001. Even though Mullah Omar, the leader of the Afghan Taliban, specifically requested that Bin Laden keep a low profile, in 1998, Bin Laden masterminded the attacks on the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania from Afghanistan. This provoked American retaliatory cruise missile strikes on al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan. While the U.S. strikes failed to kill any al-Qaeda members of consequence, they did slay several Pakistani militants associated with HuJI and HuM. And al-Qaeda allies such as **Jaish-e-Mohammad** (JeM, another Deobandi group derived from HuJI and HuM) conducted numerous attacks in India. In December 2001 JeM assailed India's parliament, bringing India and Pakistan to the brink of war. When the Americans invaded Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, Bin Laden, Taliban leadership and their Deobandi collaborators fled to Pakistan's tribal areas abutting Afghanistan.

From late 2001 onward, Pakistan's tribal areas became a safe haven for a toxic mix of regional and international terrorists. Pakistan's militant groups provided logistical support including passports, safe houses, and transport for the fleeing terrorists. The Pakistanis, working with the Americans, captured several members of al-Qaeda's senior leadership in Pakistan. By 2003, al-Qaeda had denounced Pakistan's then-military dictator and self-styled president, Pervez Musharraf, as a

“**traitor**.” Later in 2004, al-Qaeda incited Pakistanis to topple Musharraf’s government. Finally, in 2007, Bin Laden **declared war on Musharraf’s Pakistan**. Pakistan still remains in the sight of al-Qaeda for its operations against the Pakistani Taliban, which have long been close to al-Qaeda.

The Emergence of ISIS

This year, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has garnered attention for their brutal barbarism, including crucifixion, beheading, and cleansing of ethnic and religious minorities. Even though al-Qaeda has enjoyed a long presence in Pakistan and Afghanistan, ISIS quickly captured the imagination of Muslims in the subcontinent. ISIS flags and materials have appeared in Kashmir, Peshawar, and parts of Balochistan.

By many accounts, which cannot be independently verified, **hundreds** of Pakistani fighters—if not more—have already made their way to Syria and Iraq. In fact, Pakistanis began going to Iraq and Syria even **before ISIS crystallized as a group**, though it is not discernable whether they went to fight with ISIS, al-Qaeda in Iraq, the Free Syrian Army, or simply to fight the pro-Shia Iraqi government or the Syrian Alawite regime.

Saudi Arabia has long argued for increased support to the Syrian opposition against Bashar Hafez al-Assad, Syria’s Alawite president. During the tenure of former Pakistani President Asif Zardari, Pakistan and Saudi ties had cooled. When Nawaz Sharif became the Prime Minister, Saudi Arabia sought to recoup lost ground owing to Sharif’s long-standing ties with the Kingdom. Thus, in March of 2014, the Pakistani government announced that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia “gifted” Pakistan \$1.5 billion. Pakistani commentators quipped that Saudi Arabia had purchased Pakistan’s support for its regional and sectarian policies and speculated that the cash was “part of a behind-the-scenes deal for Pakistan to provide weapons for Syrian rebels.” Pakistan’s sectarian militants are also perfect cannon fodder for Saudi Arabia’s covert war in Syria.

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Despite common goals, al-Qaeda’s head Ayman al-Zawahiri distanced himself and his organization from ISIS. Al-Qaeda, still suffering the loss of its charismatic leader Osama bin Laden, is seeking to regain the initiative over its breakaway faction turned competitor, ISIS. And al-Qaeda, perhaps more so than ISIS, is sensitive to local and global public opinion.

On September 30, 2014, Zawahiri released a **video** in which he announced a revived and more ambitious al-Qaeda presence in South Asia called Jamā‘at Qā‘idat aj-Jihād fī Shībh al-Qārra al-Hindīya (the “Organization of the Base of Jihad in the Indian Sub-Continent” or simply al-Qaeda in

the Indian Subcontinent, or AQIS). Zawahiri's al-Qaeda likely hopes that its focus upon the Indian subcontinent and the past glories of the Mughal Empire in South Asia will be more attractive than the political order offered by its rival Islamic State (ISIS).

At first blush, it appears as if AQIS has some catching up to do. ISIS's Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi **gave his first public speech** after appointing himself the "caliph" of the Islamic State in July. He mentioned India three times. First, he listed India as one of several countries in which Muslims' rights have been denied. Second, he referenced the long-standing allegations of atrocities in Kashmir. In contrast, al-Qaeda had been almost completely silent about the Kashmir issue. Third, he explicitly stated that this new caliphate included India along with several other countries and territories. ISIS has also **released recruitment videos** in Hindi, Urdu, and Tamil. Equally disconcerting, some of India's Muslims have left India to fight with ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Finally, in early September, ISIS **distributed pamphlets** in Afghanistan and Pakistan (in Dari and in Pashto) that claimed they had incorporated Iran, Afghanistan, and some Muslim Central Asian republics into this purported caliphate.

Fortunately, AQIS's maiden attack in Pakistan did not go as planned. On September 6, 2014 militants associated with AQIS tried to hijack a Pakistani naval frigate. They had planned to attack U.S. naval vessels that are conducting antiterrorism patrols using the Pakistani shipboard weapon systems. The raid included Pakistani naval personnel who had been recruited by al-Qaeda and simply walked on board, in uniform and with their identification. Another tranche of militants, in Marine uniforms, were to come on board by inflatable craft. The raid was foiled when a gunner saw that those in the inflatable craft did not have standard issue weapons. The episode finally ended after a firefight and a suicide detonation. While the operation failed, it demonstrated the continued ability of al-Qaeda and other militant groups to infiltrate Pakistan's security services. In the very unlikely event that this under-resourced team of terrorists had succeeded, U.S.-Pakistan relations would hit a new nadir.

While most analysts are framing Zawahiri's move within the context of the al-Qaeda's competition with ISIS, the Islamic State is not the only competition that Zawahiri is eyeing. For years, the preeminent terror organization operating in South Asia has been Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). While LeT's literature speaks of global jihad, the organization has restricted itself to the South Asian subcontinent. Despite the fact that LeT follows the Ahl al-Hadith interpretative tradition of Islam, which shares some affinity with al-Qaeda's Salafist orientation, LeT and al-Qaeda have not been organizational collaborators. If anything, they have been competitors for the hearts and minds of South Asia. While al-Qaeda neglected Kashmir and India's Muslims, LeT made this population the primary focus of its activities. No other organization in South Asia—apart from al-Qaeda—can plan and execute complex and coordinated attacks like LeT, which garnered international fame for its November 2008 multi-day siege on India's mega port city of Mumbai. Unlike rival Deobandi militant groups, LeT has never conducted any attacks in Pakistan, likely owing to its deep alliance with the Pakistani state. LeT has even denounced such anti-state activity in its publications, which only strengthens its utility to Pakistan's deep state. It would be quite dangerous if AQIS or ISIS could lure disaffected fighters from this extremely competent organization.

Overstating ISIS' Grip on Pakistan

Despite recent media reports, there is no solid evidence that ISIS has made significant inroads into Pakistan. On the contrary, Pakistan remains al-Qaeda country. On October 6, the official spokesperson for the Pakistani Taliban **Shahidullah Shahid made it very clear** that “We are loyal to Ameer-ul-Momineen [Mullah Omar} and question does not arise to withdraw from his allegiance.” This was in clarification of an earlier report that the organization voiced its support for the ISIS. Shahidullah explained that his organization merely “**praised the Islamic State and advised them to set aside differences and show unity.**” Meanwhile the Pakistani Taliban’s chief, Mullah Fazaulah praised ISIS, declaring that those who are “fighting in Iraq and Syria” are brothers, but noted that while “We are proud of their victories,” he advised them “to forge unity, especially when the enemy stands united against them.”

While **some analysts** have read these statements as **TTP support for ISIS**, I read them as cautious appeals to ISIS to end its factionalized conflict and overt competition with other organizations operating elsewhere seeking to establish their own emirates. The TTP must craft its message carefully. After all it cannot denigrate the goal of ISIS’ own caliphate without delegitimizing its own aspirations to form an emirate in Pakistan. However, the message of loyalty to Mullah Omar and calls for unity are unmistakable. Critically, the TTP’s professed allegiance to Mullah Omar rules out any fealty to ISIS’ al-Baghdadi because al-Baghdadi declared all other “caliphates,” “sultanates,” and “emirates,” including that of the Taliban, **to be illegal**. Furthermore, the relationship between Mullah Omar and Zawahiri remains robust. In July of 2014, **Zawahiri renewed his pledge of allegiance to Mullah Omar** and confirmed that al-Qaeda and its various branches are “soldiers among his soldiers.” Pakistan’s Taliban made a clarion choice to remain allied with Mullah Omar and, by extension, al-Qaeda.

Pakistan has long played with fire with little appreciation of the deleterious consequences of doing so. Tens of thousands of Pakistanis have been killed by the erstwhile proxies of their country’s intelligence service, the ISI. Pakistan is now the terrain over which two terrible international terrorist groups are fighting. On top of this, Pakistan has been sucked into yet another proxy war, this time in Syria and Iraq. While many of its sectarian fighters will never return home, those that do will be able to wage even bloodier sectarian attacks at home. Their co-location with an international coterie of militants who share their sectarian agenda will add further ideological ballast to their cause.

An exodus of Pakistan’s Shia killers to Iraq or Syria may give Pakistan’s minorities some temporary respite. The Pakistani state can facilitate their passage passively by doing nothing to stop them from leaving or enabling their departure. But more than that, the ISI could use its marginal degree of control over these militants to actively facilitate it by providing travel documents and transport networks.

Pakistan only has one way to re-secure itself and the security of its citizens: abandon Islamist militancy as a tool of foreign policy everywhere and commit to removing the myriad militant groups

operating in and from its territory. Unfortunately, there is virtually no chance of that happening. Pakistan is likely to remain a source of terrorism in and beyond South Asia. And to make matters grimmer, there is very little that the United States can do to help Pakistan save it from itself.