

# South Asia's Islamic State

ISIS recruitment campaigns seek allegiances in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and even India

by Animesh Roul

**T**HERE ARE THOSE who want a second Islamic State, one encompassing Afghanistan, Pakistan, and parts of Central Asia and India. In January, Abu Muhammad al Adnani, a chief spokesperson of ISIS, announced the establishment of “Wilayat Khurasan”, an imaginary territory made up of those nations within South Asia.

The 2014 push by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to establish a caliphate marked a definite shift in the Jihadist landscape previously dominated by Al-Qaeda. Unhindered almost until now, the successful rise of ISIS under the leadership of Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-proclaimed Caliph Ibrahim, has given the organization enough clout to push the ideals of the Islamic State (I.S.) in other Muslim-dominated regions.

ISIS first began outreach efforts in South Asia to acquire recruits and resources for its battles in Iraq and Syria. Several Muslim youths from India, Pakistan, the Maldives, and Bangladesh have reportedly travelled to fight under the I.S. banner in Iraq and Syria. Since June 2014, the call of ISIS has not only resonated within the region's myriad militant groups, it has also reached many unconnected individuals through propaganda disseminated on social media.

The January announcement of the formation of Wilayat Khurasan, an ‘Islamic State of South Asia’,

may be wishful, but it marks a new direction for recruitment efforts. ISIS is not only seeking to draw young soldiers to its side but to empower them to spread its cause in other regions. Adnani announced that the new I.S. province would be headed by Hafiz Saeed Khan, a former Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan commander, who earlier released a video message pledging allegiance to the I.S. along with at least 100 Taliban fighters. The video also showed the beheading of a Pakistan army

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soldier. Adnani stated that Khan fulfilled all necessary conditions to become the governor of the so-called I.S. Khurasan province of South Asia.

## The ‘Af-Pak ISIS’

Khan and his fellow jihadists released the gruesome oath-taking video in early January as one of the newly splintered groups emerging from the dis-

integration of the Pakistan Taliban last year. The beheading carried out by Saeed Khan and others, perhaps the first anti-Pakistan operation by the I.S. Khurasan, marked the arrival of the ISIS brand of violent jihad in the region.

Concerns aired by a U.N. envoy recently about I.S. inroads into Afghanistan were not misplaced. The Islamic State has established a substantial support base in Afghanistan, where Al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders are struggling to remain relevant in the face of I.S.'s growing stature in the Levant region and beyond. The

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black flags of I.S. have been hoisted in the Ghazni and Nimroz provinces of Afghanistan. Hundreds of Taliban Mujahideen have reportedly switched allegiances to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the Islamic State.

The Taliban has fought against losing ground in Afghanistan. Direct confrontations occurred in the Kajaki district between supporters of the Islamic State and followers of Taliban warlord Abdul Rahim Akhund in January.

Before the formalization of Wilayat Khurasan, Pakistan was at the periphery of I.S. influence. There were occasional ISIS flags and graffiti in support of I.S. ideals, as well as verbal support from radical clerics like Maulana Abdul Aziz, who urged Taliban militants to pledge their allegiance to the Islamic State. Lesser-known extremist organizations, like the Tahreek-e-Khilafat Wa Jihad (Movement for the Caliphate and Jihad - TKJ), as well as anti-Shiite militant groups, such as Jundullah, expressed support for ISIS and al-Baghdadi. ISIS even received support from established sectarian groups like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and Ahl-e-Sunnat Wal Jamaat.

However, the unearthing of an ISIS recruitment drive in Pakistan raised eyebrows in security circles. Unconfirmed reports suggest that

by October, ISIS had recruited thousands of youths from the Hangu and Kurram regions. Pakistani agencies arrested Yousaf al-Salafi, from Lahore, on January 20 for recruiting youths and sending them abroad for jihad. Al-Salafi, a Syrian of Pakistani origin, was reportedly involved in an ISIS recruitment campaign and charging ISIS about \$600 per person.

**The Expansion of the Islamic State**

The existence of a dedicated I.S. unit in Afghanistan and Pakistan raises the threat of a consolidated front for the jihadi organizations in the region. The number of recent arrests and detainments of Islamic State supporters and sympathizers at airports and elsewhere in the neighboring Maldives, Bangladesh, and India have shown the reach of grassroots radical Islam in the region. The growing presence of an official I.S. in South Asia can only make it worse.

The Maldives have experienced a series of jihadi-related departures since October 2013, when young Maldivians began travelling to Syria and Iraq to participate in the civil war alongside jihadist formations like Jabhat al Nusra and the earlier incarnation of ISIS. By late October 2014, at least six people, including a family of four from Raa Atoll, had travelled to ISIS-held territory in Syria and Iraq from the Maldives.



*Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ISIS' leader in Iraq*



*ISIS promotional photograph*

Social media's role in the radicalization process in the Maldives remains noteworthy. A number of pro-Islamic State Facebook and Twitter pages have urged young Maldivian Muslims to "strive for the caliphate and to stand up against the [the country's] existing democratic system of governance". I.S. influence reached the Maldivian shores through social media websites, for instance the "Islamic State of Maldives" (ISM) Facebook group, whose members claim to be

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affiliated with the Islamic State. The flag of the I.S. was hoisted in the Malé's Raalhugandu area by unidentified individuals in July that year. I.S. flags were also seen during an early August protest march in the capital, Malé, against the Israeli offensive on Gaza City. The following month, pro-Islamist hardliners descended on the streets of Malé holding I.S. flags and banners, calling for the implementation of Sharia law in the country. Some of the banners read: "We want the laws of the Quran, not the green book [Maldivian constitution]," "Islam will eradicate secularism," "No democracy, we

want just Islam," and "Sharia will dominate the world."

In Bangladesh, established Islamist groups like the Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh and more radical and violent Ansarullah Bangla Team are believed to be in contact with I.S. leaders. Footage also emerged in 2014 showing Bangladeshi nationals fighting in Syria, and youths declaring their allegiance to al-Baghdadi. In September last year, Bangladesh police arrested a Bangladeshi-Briton recruiter for ISIS, identified as Samiun Rahman, on terror charges. Rahman was reportedly in the country to recruit volunteers for jihad in Syria and Iraq. His interrogations led to the arrest of at least five suspected militants, including members of the Ansarullah Bangla Team.

Fresh evidence of the Islamic State's inroads into Bangladesh came on January 19, when police detained Sakhawatul Kabir, along with three other people, in possession of incriminating documents and a laptop containing jihadi information. Kabir was subsequently identified as the regional commander of the Islamic State's operations in Bangladesh, while his associate Anwar Hossain was identified as the group's local financier.

**How Far Can it Reach?**

Even in India, sporadic incidents, like the waving of I.S. flags and masked men wearing shirts with I.S. insignias, were noticed in Kashmir and Tamil Nadu



between July and October 2014. Before that, in May, four Indian engineering students travelled to Iraq via a third country to join ISIS forces. Areeb Majeed, a radicalized youth, who returned to India recently, confessed to having undergone training in suicide bombing. While the remaining three youths are still inside the war zone, this event demonstrated I.S.'s growing support base in India.

At the same time, Indian security officials arrested business executive Mehdi Mashroor Biswas in mid-December for running a pro-I.S. Twitter account. It was being used for incitement and propaganda targeting Muslim youths wanting to join the Caliphate. Moreover, al-Baghdadi's call was endorsed by well-known Sunni cleric Maulana Salman Nadwi in India. And in Tamil Nadu, imam Faizur Rahman facilitated an I.S. campaign in the Southern Indian state by procuring, printing, and distributing materials in support of the Islamic State.

In addition to these supporters for the cause of I.S., there is an increasing threat of lone wolves in the region. I.S. and Al-Qaeda have both encouraged the idea of fighting solo against Western nationals and properties as a way to instill fear. Such concerns have intensified in India after the arrest of Anees Ansari in Mumbai in October. He confessed he had attempted a knife attack on a U.S. national to get support and sympathy from ISIS. Ansari too had reportedly collected details from the Internet about 'Flame Throwers' and 'Thermite' bombs and hinted at a plot to target U.S. establishments, including a school in Mumbai.

Although the transnational jihadi group continues to find supporters in the region, I.S. has known major setbacks as well. Three top regional commanders have been killed in separate incidents, two in Afghanistan and one in Syria. The regional jihadi forces are also divided, largely on operational and ideological grounds, between the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda announced a South Asian branch in the Indian subcontinent in September and has been increasingly focusing on long-term consolidations in order to dominate the militant Islamist discourse in the subcontinent.

Between I.S. and Al-Qaeda influences, however, the risk is only growing. The I.S. footprint in South Asia suggests that there is immense traction for its ideology in the region. With its massive outreach efforts using social networks and releasing propaganda materials to galvanize support, I.S. has gained significant momentum within a short span of time. The Pakistan-Afghanistan border region is at risk of becoming another I.S. conflict situation, and the Islamic State of Khurasan is likely only the beginning. With the absence of regional cohesion among governments, especially on a unified counterterrorism strategy, there is an increasing risk of I.S. establishing pockets of influence in South Asian countries. ■

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*ISIS recruitment video*