

## COUNTER-TERRORISM PERSPECTIVE

*Writings on armed insurgencies, islamist violence, radicalisation, violent jihad and other forms of asymmetric conflicts and policy responses in South Asia and beyond.*

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# AL QAEDA IN THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT

*Spearheading Jihad in South Asia: 2014-2020*



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## KEY FINDINGS:

- Al Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent, the fifth and youngest affiliate of Al Qaeda group, struggles to impact jihadist movement in the region even after Six years of existence.
- AQIS continues to maintain that the Western countries (Europe and the US) and South Asian countries are "apostate" and at war with Islam.
- Afghanistan and Pakistan would remain the epicentres of AQIS operations and safe havens for the fighters even after the deaths of its several leaders in the last couple of years.
- In Pakistan's four provinces, Punjab, Sind, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, AQIS has a substantial presence and is operating in small units. It exploits Madrasa networks for recruitment.
- In Bangladesh, the AQIS branch Ansar al Islam remains largely inactive and but possibly trying to regroup and resurge aligning with other Al Qaeda inspired groups such as HuJI-B and JMB.
- AQIS has the advantage of emanating from local disgruntled extremist elements in India with a growing communal divide and increased incidences of vigilante attacks on Muslims in the country.
- Since AQIS follows Al Qaeda's 'long war' model, it focuses on grassroots mobilisation infiltrating through Madrasas networks in South Asia, especially in India and Bangladesh. Despite the recent loss of its leadership, AQIS would most likely regain and resurge in the region due to the intact grassroots network.
- AQIS continues to present significant threat within its areas of operations such as in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh through its existing capacity to stage target killings, ambush and sporadic bombings either by its militants or through local jihadi networks.

**POLICY IMPLICATIONS:**

1. Absence of regionally coordinated counterterrorism effort against a regional Jihadi group like AQIS is one of the significant factors contributing to its existence and resilience building. It is, therefore, imperative for South Asian countries to devise a coordinated or joint anti-terrorism strategy to fight forces like AQIS.
2. The emerging or any future real-time integration and operational collaborations with powerful South Asian militant formations such as Lashkar e Taiba or Jaish-e-Muhammed would be detrimental for the region, and this could force South Asian countries and the United States to shift their counter-terror strategy against AQIS in the region. With the dwindling influence of Islamic State in the region, AQIS would likely expand its support base and pose new security challenges to the South Asian countries. The focus and epicentre of offensive strategy would go beyond Afghanistan or Pakistan.
3. It certainly takes advantage of regional conflicts (e.g., India-Pakistan), porous borders (India-Bangladesh-Nepal) and prevalent anti-Muslim policies for propaganda purpose. To counter effectively, the governments primarily India, Bangladesh and Pakistan should formulate counter-propaganda strategy, empowering moderate or progressive Islamic forces in their respective countries to raise a robust voice against the Al Qaeda's Jihad narratives.

## ABSTRACT

The enduring presence of the transnational Jihadi terrorist group Al Qaeda, the so-called vanguard of the global jihadist movement, reminds us of its stature, strength and resilience in the face of a decade-long concerted 'war on terror' against this group and its support system across the globe. Since the deadly September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States, the group's leadership strategically achieved relative success in expanding its physical infrastructure and ideological base. It did this by establishing regional affiliates, unifying militant factions and co-opting local militant formations primarily in Asia and Africa. While the group itself has been unable to stage violent, audacious assaults like 9/11 and has suffered massive setbacks through the years at the hands of the US-led international coalition, Al Qaeda Central (AQC) has managed to survive. The survival and longevity have been possible because of its increasing members and sympathisers, through its regional branches in the Arabian Peninsula and South Asia.

The youngest subsidiary of this group is the Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), which is proving to be one of the most resilient regional affiliates of Al Qaeda. It has been proactive and influential in its virtual campaign in many countries in South Asia, primarily where there is a significant presence of Muslim populations, such as in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. This paper explores the emergence and growth of AQIS over almost six years of its existence starting from September 2014 through June 2020.

It also examines how AQIS strives to influence the jihadist movement in the region to achieve its core objectives. Further, it will explore AQIS' expanded geographical scope in which Afghanistan and Myanmar (Burma) will be included in its supposed domain of influence and operation. In order to understand AQIS' resilience and intermittent resurgence, it is imperative to study its organisational structure, leadership, internal hierarchy, ideological motivation, both short and long-term goals and operations that are driving its expansion targets, tactics and strategy. To effectively analyse AQIS' strength and threat perception, this paper has delved into its relationship with local subsidiaries and inspired militant groups. There is a particular focus on India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, for a broader understanding of how and to what degree AQIS exercises command and control over its expanded structure. Finally, the paper looks at the group's outlook and what the future holds for AQIS.

**KEYWORDS:** *Al Qaeda, AQIS, South Asia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Afghanistan*

## 1. Key Facts

**Name:** Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (Organization of Qaeda for Jihad in the Indian sub-continent). In Arabic, *Jamaat Qaedat al-jihad fashibhi al-Qarrat al-Hindiya* is the South Asian affiliate/franchise of Al Qaeda (Qaedat al-Jihad) terrorist group.

Type: Transnational Islamist and Jihadist group.

**Status:** Actively operating and recruiting in South Asian countries primarily in Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. The US State Department designated AQIS as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) on July 1, 2016.[1] India banned AQIS and all its affiliates on June 21, 2018.[2] Bangladesh and Pakistan too imposed proscriptions on AQIS or its factions. [3]

**Leader (s):** Following the formation of AQIS in September 2014, the supreme leader of Al Qaeda Central or Core (hereafter, AQC) Ayman Al Zawahiri appointed Indian origin Islamist cleric Asim Umar as the chief of the group, Muhammad Farooq as his deputy and Usama (also Osama) Mahmoud as AQIS spokesperson. As of June 2020 Usama Mahmoud is presently heading AQIS following the death of Asim Umar on September 23, 2019, in Musa Kala in Helmand Province, Afghanistan.

**Summary:** AQIS emerged as a conglomeration of existing militant groups within the Indian Subcontinent, mostly targeting security forces, carrying out target killings, kidnapping people for ransom in Pakistan and Bangladesh and fighting alongside Taliban in Afghanistan. At the time of its formation, it was endorsed as a "vanguard of Muslims in the East" by Al Qaeda's powerful AQAP, the Arabian Peninsula branch. However, over six years of its resilient existence, it has failed to carry out strategic strikes despite its organisational strength, strong ties with local militant groups and the terror infrastructures at its disposal in South Asia.

## 2. INTRODUCTION

### 2.1. Group Formation

In early September 2014, Ayman Al Zawahiri announced the fifth official affiliate of Al Qaeda, the Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), by uniting several existing terrorist groups based out of Afghanistan and Pakistan. He categorically mentioned in the inaugural video message that AQIS "is the fruit of a blessed effort for more than two years, for gathering the mujahideen in the Indian sub-continent into one entity".<sup>[4]</sup> These groups were well-known for their previous operational and ideological allegiance to Al Qaeda. Though the official statement did not name these groups and individuals who came under the banner of AQIS, they are Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden's long-standing supporters such as Harkat ul Jihadi Islami (HuJI) led by Qari Saifullah Akhtar and Harkat-ul Mujahideen (HuM) led by Fazlur Rehman Khalil. Both these groups have been closely associated with Al Qaeda since its inception and were arguably precursors of jihadism in AfPak region. Others suspected to be behind the AQIS formation were elements from Pakistan based sectarian groups such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Jaish e Muhammed (JeM) and Adnan Rasheed led Ansar-al Aseer. A Pakistan Taliban faction such as Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA) too extended its allegiance to AQIS.

Al Qaeda Central continues to pledge its allegiance to Afghan Taliban and its supreme leader Mullah Omar and his successors including Akhtar Mansour and the present Taliban leader Haibatullah Akhundzada. Accordingly, both Zawahiri and Asim Umar made it clear from the outset that AQIS too would work closely with the Taliban and protect the so-called 'Islamic Emirate' and its leader.<sup>[5]</sup> This pledge of loyalty ensures the promise of safe havens and availability of resources for Al Qaeda leaders and fighters in and around Taliban controlled areas in the AfPak region. With blessings from the Afghan Taliban and the dreaded Haqqani Networks (HQN), AQIS leaders have possibly reached out to other fugitive militants. These militants, mostly from India and Bangladesh and refugees from Myanmar, have been holed up in Afghanistan and Pakistan's tribal areas fighting alongside Taliban and Al Qaeda groups. <sup>[6]</sup> The aptest example of AQIS' outreach towards Indian militants hiding in Pakistan is Riyaz Bhatkal, the chief of Indian Mujahideen (IM), who paid a visit to Asim Umar in Karachi to pay his obeisance and to seek support for the Al Qaeda branch.<sup>[7]</sup> Similarly, several independent, hitherto unknown, militant formations such as Ansar Ut-Tawhid Wal Jihad (Kashmir) and Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), subsequently morphed into Ansar al Islam and expressed support for AQIS becoming the official AQIS chapter for the Bangladesh operation. <sup>[8]</sup>

It should be noted that before the formation of AQIS, Al Qaeda with its dominant presence in Afghanistan and Pakistan's tribal areas, had generated immense clout among a myriad of



militant groups with Salafi and Deobandi lineage. Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden have donated a large amount of funds to these groups. Furthermore, they have often played mediator or arbitrator roles to settle disputes between or among various militant factions while pledging their allegiance to the Taliban. This legacy helped the AQC leadership to convince existing or struggling groups to form a regional branch.

At various times within the last six years, Zawahiri and other AQIS leaders have praised several militant commanders, acknowledging their contribution towards the unification of jihadist elements and the formation of AQIS. This information can be found in various official statements and audio-visual releases, for example, Abu Dujana al-Pasha (Muhammad Mahmood al-Bahteti), one of the founders of AQIS and a relative of al-Zawahiri, who died a month before the formalisation of AQIS was identified through this method. They also sang high praises of the senior Al Qaeda operatives like Muhammad Farooq, Qari Imran, Khaleed Sheikh Muhammad, Adam Gadahn, Zuhair al Maghribi and Umar Talib for their contributions in the formation of AQIS and helping with its media branch Al Sahab and its Urdu language 'Al Sahab Subcontinent' division.[9] Much before the formal announcement of AQIS, the AQC seniors faced criticism for diluting Al Qaeda's Wahabi-Salafi legacy by a renegade commander Abu Jarir as-Shamali who later joined the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS). As-Shamali's criticism against Al Qaeda leadership was directed against the promotion of Deobandi Islamist clerics like Asim Umar and Ahmad Farooq in the ranks and file of the group. Both Farooq and Umar were having South Asian lineage which took over Al Qaeda's South Asian affiliate and its Urdu propaganda media unit. [10]

## 2.2. Aims and Objectives

The broader Al Qaeda objectives — be it its anti-Western jihadist philosophy or its aim to unite the global Muslim community (Ummah) or to strive for the Islamic Caliphate following Islamic (Sharia) law — remain the same for all its regional affiliates, including AQIS. The affiliates are mostly focused on local dynamics and agendas. For AQIS, however, Ayman al-Zawahiri, the chief of AQC, Asim Umar, the first Emir of the group and Usama Mahmood the spokesperson of AQIS, clearly delineated in its inaugural video message in early September 2014 as to why a dedicated South Asian branch is being established and what it wants to achieve in its region of operation.[11] In a nutshell, the founding statement of AQIS stated several goals or objectives. They are:

- To continue Jihad against America and the Western world, who according to Al Qaeda, are the enemies of Islam.
- To restore Muslim society according to the tenets of Islam.
- To liberate all the occupied lands belonging to Muslims and to liberate the subjugated Muslim populace of the Indian Subcontinent.
- To continue Jihad to restore the Caliphate.

- To support the Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan (Taliban regime).

AQIS was formed with the stated goals to continue Jihad against enemies of Islam and to restore and revive the Islamic Caliphate in the Indian Subcontinent. AQIS also vowed to liberate all of the occupied lands of the Muslims and liberate the subjugated Muslims of the Indian Subcontinent, including Kashmir and Myanmar, from the 'oppression, tribulation and corruption' prevalent in the region. At various times during its existence, AQIS and AQC leaders reiterated its support to the Afghan Taliban (the so-called Islamic Emirate) and vowed to defend Afghanistan and the Afghan Taliban against foreign aggressions. Indeed, Afghanistan has particular relevance for both AQC and its South Asian affiliate. In the words of AQIS spokesman Usama Mahmoud, 'AQIS was an extension of the blessed campaign of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan'. The leaders also intermittently urged Muslims of the South Asian region to pledge their allegiance and to extend support to the Islamic Emirate under Taliban rule. According to Al Qaeda, the Taliban regime is the only hope for Muslims to restore the Caliphate and to protect the entire Muslim world.

By stating these goals, the AQIS maintained its campaign against the U.S. and Western countries in general. Several times, it incited attacks in the U.S. and European countries, even with its limited capability. For example, AQIS incited 'Lone-Wolf' attacks in the West in a statement to avenge the insults meted out to Prophet Muhammad. This statement issued in September 2018.[12] Like the Al Qaeda Core, AQIS too has dedicated itself to the ongoing Taliban insurgencies in Afghanistan and supports the conflicts in Somalia, Syria, Yemen, Kashmir and Myanmar.

### **2.3. Areas of Operation**

According to the AQIS officials, various media releases and on-ground reports from the war zone of Afghanistan and Pakistan, it is amply evident that the group is headquartered and has an active presence in Taliban controlled areas in Afghanistan and bordering areas in Pakistan's Waziristan region. AQIS' foot-soldiers, are fighting along with the Taliban and embedded in the Taliban-led insurgency much before its inception. The group has successfully extended its shadowy presence in Bangladesh and India as well, primarily by co-opting local like-minded militant groups and extremist elements adhering to Al Qaeda's jihadi guidelines and world-views. AQIS is attempting to strengthen Al Qaeda's organisation throughout South Asia, working with groups from Bangladesh, India, Kashmir, Pakistan and any other countries that are likely to be open to its growth. The Pakistani Taliban is closely allied with Al Qaeda as well.

The following section discusses AQIS related incidents in Afghanistan and Pakistan to illustrate its presence and operations. The group's India and Bangladesh operations will be examined in the latter part of the paper.

**2.3.1. AFGHANISTAN:** AQIS as a group, receives military supplies, training and a haven from the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani network.[13] In October 2015, the U.S. military destroyed a couple of large Al Qaeda training camps in the Shorabak district of Kandahar. One of these training camps attributed to AQIS was considered one of the largest Al Qaeda training camps in post-2001 Afghanistan.

AQIS' operational documents, such as its June 2017 "Code of Conduct", revealed that it has engaged in fighting alongside Taliban against the government forces. While AQIS elements continue to work with Afghan Taliban and Al Qaeda Central forces, the primary base or hideouts are identified inside Afghanistan's Kandahar, Ghazni, Laghman, Paktika and Zabul provinces, which are all Taliban strongholds. In 2018, the United Nations investigations citing Afghan government sources identified these provinces as hotspots for AQIS operations.[14] A cursory look at the deaths of AQIS commanders and foot soldiers during military offensives either by the Afghan National Army or the US-led forces in the last few years show that these provinces and few others such as Helmand and Nimroz provinces have been major AQIS sanctuaries. There was also information on AQIS training centres in Baramcha (Deshu district) in the Helmand province and due to its proximity to Pakistan border areas, since most of the Karachi and Balochistan based militants received their training there.[15]

Al-Sahab Media Foundation (Subcontinent) on May 8, 2019, in a promotional video titled "Under the Shade of the Islamic Emirate" showcased its fighters with RPGs and rockets preparing to target an Afghan army convoy in Paktika.[16] Multiple military operations targeting Al Qaeda leaders in Ghazni in 2017 resulted in the death of a few senior operatives such as HuJI's Qari Saifullah Akhtar and AQIS's second in command, Omar Khattab.[17] The Afghan government sources too underscored Al Qaeda's role in the Taliban's August 2018 assault on the provincial capital, Ghazni City.[18]

More recently, in March 2019 a military offensive in Giro district of south-eastern Ghazni killed over 30 AQIS militants, including several suicide bombers. An AQIS commander, Qari Arif, ran the militant compound, destroyed by the airstrikes.[19] The Ghazni district had significant AQIS related incidents in the last couple of years. On September 23, 2019, a similar joint US-Afghan raid on a Taliban compound in Musa Qala district in Helmand province killed six senior ranking AQIS leaders and operatives, including the Emir Asim Omar and his messenger to Ayman al Zawahiri identified as Raihan. The Musa Qala operation, targeting a wedding party, terminated two top-ranking AQIS leaders in charge of Helmand province.[20]

Coinciding with the US and Taliban peace deal, on March 21, 2020, AQIS claimed in one of its key Urdu language magazines 'Nawa-i Afghan Jihad' that the group would shift its focus to neighbouring Kashmir and India. It even announced to change the title of its long-running

publication 'Nawa-i Afghan Jihad' to 'Nawa-i Gazawatul Hind.' [21] This name change signalled the geographical and operational shift, justifying the objectives behind its name, formation and area of influence. The issue of the magazine also devoted a whole chapter on Jihad in Kashmir, announcing that the region will be the epicentre of AQIS' jihadist campaign. With a swift hosting all its propaganda materials on a web portal with the domain name of Gazawatul Hind (final battle against India), AQIS cleared the air about its aggressive future India-Kashmir-centric strategy. The apparent intention to gravitate toward the Kashmir theatre and to shift to a more Kashmir-centric campaign surfaced at a time when there is a peace deal between United States-Taliban to put an end to decades long conflict in Afghanistan. The operational ties between al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan remains problem area. The Taliban led Islamic Emirate has sheltered al-Qaeda's leadership and foot soldiers since 2001. However, the Taliban now agreed under the peace deal signed in Doha (Qatar) on February 29 to prevent any group or individual, including "al-Qaeda from using the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies." [22]

The potential end of Taliban protection may be the reason AQIS is shifting the centre of its operations. Anticipating the future turn of events in Afghanistan and the fast-changing situation on the ground for the Taliban post-peace deal, al-Qaeda's central command on March 12 urged its fighters to display commitment toward the U.S.-Taliban deal. The statement released on its official al-Sahab media and social media platforms (e.g., Telegram and RocketChat), underscored the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan rather than the 'peace' aspect of the agreement, calling it a "humiliating defeat for the US and its allies." AQIS too welcomed the U.S.-Taliban deal as a victory. It urged the Afghan populace to support the Taliban in its quest to establish an Islamic Caliphate under Sharia law.

**2.3.2. PAKISTAN:** AQIS has a robust presence in Pakistan's Balochistan, Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Sindh. [23] The Al Qaeda affiliated group started its violent campaign on Pakistani soil perpetrating two successive strikes in September 2014 by assassinating Brigadier General Zahoor Fazal Qadri in Sargodha, Punjab province and the failed hijacking attempt of Pakistan Navy frigate PNS Zulfiqar. AQIS has claimed in the past that Pakistan belongs to Islamists. On August 14, 2018, the same day Pakistan celebrates its Independence Day, AQIS spokesman Usama Mahmoud reiterated this stance in a 26-minute Urdu audio statement titled, "Pakistan Is Ours", on a jihadi Telegram social media channel. He questioned the identity and ideology of Pakistan, saying that the purpose of creating Pakistan was for enforcement of the Islamic rule and added that the real Pakistan based on Islam would triumph in the future. [24] Information shared by Afghanistan's intelligence agency, the National Directorate of Security (NDS), in the aftermath of the Musa Qala raid suggested that the original locations of these slain Al Qaeda militants were in Chaman (Balochistan), Waziristan and Peshawar (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) in Pakistan, where the group has possible hideouts or presence. [25] Beyond these two provinces in Pakistan, AQIS has operational presence in the Sindh province, especially in Karachi. Since AQIS has been predominantly

present in Pakistan's soil and most of its leaders and operatives are from Pakistan, it is not surprising that cities like Karachi and Peshawar remain the epicentres for AQIS activities. [26]

In 2017, a suspected faction of AQIS, Ansar al-Sharia Pakistan (AAS-P), started operating in Karachi starting with several attacks against security forces. The AAS-P was reportedly formed by two former Al-Qaida members who had severed ties with the organisation in early 2017. It is not clear if AQIS had any operational control over AAS-P while the group unleashed several attacks in Karachi that year. Nevertheless, what is clear is that AAS-P publicly dissociated from the Islamic State and its brand of Jihad and vowed to continue its Jihad against "infidel and apostates." [27]

Recent developments in Karachi, which has a dedicated AQIS unit, have indicated a substantial presence of AQIS militants in the city and neighbouring areas. Shahid Usman, the Karachi unit chief of AQIS, was arrested in December 2014, a few months after the establishment of the Al Qaeda branch.[28] His successor was Noor-ul-Hasan, who took charge of the AQIS unit in Karachi until his death in an encounter in April 2015.[29]

The City also witnessed the arrests of the chief of Sindh province, Umar Jalal Chandio from Karachi's Gulshan-e-Iqbal locality in November 2018 and another senior operative Ahsan Mehsud from the Mominabad area of Karachi in March 2018.[30][31] Both were allegedly involved or somehow linked with the Safoora Goth bus attack of May 2015 in which over 40 members of Ismail-Shia community were shot dead by a splinter militant group.[32] However, AQIS didn't claimed credit for Saffora goth sectarian violence. The AQIS-Karachi unit encountered a significant loss in June 2019 when the police raided a militant hideout in Khuda Baksh Goth. In the ensuing encounter three AQIS militants, including the Sindh province chief Talat Mehmood, were killed.[33] The Counter-Terrorism Department (CTD) of Pakistan mentioned on October 14, 2019, that AQIS has been regrouping in the city to carry out terrorist attacks. At least six operatives of the group sneaked into Karachi from Afghanistan to carry out sectarian attacks.[34] In April 2020, a joint intelligence unit apprehended four AQIS militants from Karachi's Gulistan-i-Jauhar neighbourhood along with arms and ammunitions. The group was acting under the leadership of senior AQIS local commander Mohammed Hanif, operating from Afghanistan. The militants were planning to carry out terrorist strikes targeting major installations in Karachi including the Pakistan Stock Exchange, City Courts, Police Training Centre and offices of law enforcement agencies.[35]

AQIS also faced similar reversals in Pakistan's Punjab province. A major setback for AQIS network in Pakistan came in June 2020 when Gujranwala (Punjab) Anti-Terrorism Court (ATC) convicted and imprisoned five militants for 16 years for terror financing, possessing explosives and running Al Qaeda propaganda unit. [36] This was the first time AQIS militants were convicted under Pakistan's court of law. This unit operated a media cell of the

AQIS in Gujranwala when intercepted in December 2019. One of the convicted operative Asim Akbar is associated with Al Qaeda since 2005. A resident of Punjab Asim Akbar owned a dedicated printing press where AQIS's literature was published and circulated.[37]

In one of the editions of its Urdu magazine (Nawa-i-Afghan Jihad, February 2020), AQIS had a sensational claim. It claimed that a retired Pakistani general Shahid Aziz who went missing in 2016 had joined the group. Aziz later died in the custody of Pakistani authorities. The magazine eulogised Aziz saying that he "chose the path of jihad." [38] The magazine also has devoted a section to mark the death anniversary of Mumtaz Qadri, who was hanged for murdering a leading politician who criticised Pakistan's blasphemy laws. Qadri was convicted for assassinating former Punjab governor Salman Taseer over his opposition to the country's blasphemy law.[39]

AQIS' strives for Islamic rule in Pakistan. Its anti-Pakistan posturing is most evident from its propaganda literature. Usama Mahmoud, the present head of the group and chief spokesman, raised his voice against Pakistan several times in the past. In a statement which remains guiding indicator for AQIS's broader goals, released on August 14, 2018, ironically coinciding with Pakistan's Independence Day celebrations. The statement titled, 'Pakistan Is Ours,' released on various online platforms and social media channels, questioned the real identity of Pakistan. Usama Mahmoud attempted to answer several questions such as "Who should be the real custodian of Pakistan; who is destroying the country; and the foremost, to whom does Pakistan belong." [40] AQIS' criticism against Pakistan's politicians and military remains constant and often vociferous.

### **3. THREAT ASSESSMENT**

#### **3.1. Overview**

Like Al Qaeda, AQIS promotes violent Jihad to establish Sharia rule in the region. It continues to present significant threats within its areas of operations such as Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The threat emanates from its existing capacity to stage target killings, stage an ambush and sporadic bombings either by its militants or through local jihadi networks. It is important to note that AQIS is not known for any significant violence or attacks in South Asia so far, rather it is known for its threat to carry out attacks. It incited attacks against prominent activists, intellectuals, and writers in Bangladesh between 2013-2016, causing at least 11 deaths. In Pakistan, the group took responsibility for several successful and foiled attacks. In India, AQIS has not achieved any success in perpetrating violence so far.

As far as AQIS' capability beyond the South Asian region is concerned, the group is not capable of launching an attack on the US or European soils. It has only issued empty threats or incited other groups to attack Americans or Europeans and their business interests within

its region of influence. Thus, AQIS can only pose a significant threat to Western interests at the regional level (South Asia) at present.

### 3.2. Strategy and Targets

Since its emergence, AQIS leaders have often focused on future targets and how a successful attack can be achieved, mostly against America and its allies (e.g., Israel and European countries) and Bangladesh and India which are perceived to have 'oppressive anti-Muslim regimes'. AQIS spokesman Usama Mahmoud reiterated several times that AQIS does not consider only India within its influence, but the whole Subcontinent, including, Afghanistan and Myanmar. He further stated that Hindus are not the only enemy of Muslims, but also the Pakistani army, which is a 'puppet' in the hands of the US government.

Mahmoud's statement released on September 16 (2014), later published in its English language magazine, *Resurgence* (released in October 2014), stated that the real target of the foiled Naval dockyard operation in Karachi was the American Naval fleet in the Indian Ocean. The operation planned to use hijacked Pakistani warships. His reason for such an attack was that, "America's naval-military capability represents the backbone of its global empire of oppression." AQIS also unveiled plans of attacking oil tankers passing through the Strait of Hormuz by identifying several vulnerable points. The *Resurgence* detailed the strategy citing examples of attack on the French oil tanker, *Limburg*, off the coast of Yemen in 2002, and how AQIS disrupted international shipping movement in the Strait for their plan.[41] It also noted that in the future, there would be coordinated efforts to disrupt shipping in all the regions where the US has a significant presence. The magazine also explained how guerrilla tactics would help militants to achieve tactical advantage. It covered, among other things, how avoiding war at a given time can be a method of fighting. [42]

Besides the *Resurgence's* description of various future targets and strategy to achieve Jihadi goals, the AQIS came out with a more robust and specific set of guidelines for violent Jihad after almost three years of its formation. It released a 20-page "Code of Conduct" document in June 2017 emphasising its allegiance to Zawahiri and the Emir of the Taliban once again. This document reiterated its geographical focus and objectives, mostly prioritising the attack of military targets. The document is vital for several reasons as it provides details about bureaucratic structure and operations of AQIS and, more importantly, the future targets of AQIS.

The "code of conduct" document specified its targets in different countries in South Asia. They are: [43]

- Western targets in Afghanistan to defend the so-called Islamic Emirate there.
- Military targets in Pakistan: Armed forces, private security agencies, and the blasphemers.

- Targets and enemies in Bangladesh and India: Armed forces and police in both countries along with Hindu right-wing groups in India.
- Targets in Myanmar (Burma): In Myanmar, AQIS aims to target the military accused of atrocities against the Rohingya Muslims in the Rakhine State and the armed Buddhist groups festering hatred against the minority Muslim population.

The 'Code of Conduct' document advocated for its readers to help oppressed Muslims and secular groups that are fighting or 'aiding' the countries against the 'mujahideen'. It also urged militants to avoid operations that are deemed unnecessary or counterproductive, precisely what was recommended in Resurgence in terms of battle strategy.

After a brief lull in 2018, AQIS renewed its propaganda campaigns by continually focussing on targets and possible attacks in South Asia to be carried out in 2019. This campaign suggests that Al Qaeda's South Asian affiliate is still a force to reckon with despite several major setbacks that include Asim Umar's death in September 2019. Asim Umar had reiterated in a series of messages that, 'infidelity can only be defeated by jihad' and urged all Pakistanis to join the fight to establish Islamic Sharia in Pakistan. The spokesman Mahmoud too accused the Pakistani establishment of "imposing corrupt systems" upon Muslims by the use of "force and coercion". He called on militants to prioritise "America and other anti-Islam global infidel powers" while choosing their targets.

### 3.3. Information Campaigns

Following the steps of Al Qaeda's powerful Arabian Peninsula affiliate, AQAP, which played a pivotal role in Al Qaeda's global jihad campaign in terms of propaganda, AQIS too played a vital role through its English and Urdu language propaganda literature and media outlets. Broadly, there are two areas of constant focus by AQIS media campaign which are on 'Far' enemies (Anti-Western propaganda, against the US, Israel, Christian and Jews) and the 'Near' enemy (Anti-Pakistan Campaign -- Pakistan military). The category of the 'Near' enemy also includes a Saffron Terror Campaign (The Hindu right wings in India) and the War against Secular and Anti-Islam (Taghut) governments (Bangladesh and Myanmar).

Like AQAP's Inspire magazine series, AQIS published at least two issues of Resurgence magazine. The first issue (October 2014) covered most of the countries of South Asia and touching bits and pieces of Myanmar and East Turkestan, under the editorship of Hassaan Yusuf. He in his editorial, "A Step Towards Unity of Ranks", expanded on why AQIS was formed and its broader set of goals. [44]

The idea behind an AQIS information campaign is broadly to win the hearts and minds of the Muslim populace of South Asia. The campaign often uses real or perceived insults of the Prophet Muhammad and exploits such instances to mobilise support, particularly in Pakistan



and Bangladesh. In regular intervals, AQIS media units feed and educate its followers for a long war in the region. Its various media units focus on the narrative of Ghazwat al-Hind (Islamic Battle against India). In it, the jihadist mythology is highlighted for the re-establishment of the Islamic Caliphate under the Sharia law. Besides, the statements from Al Zawahiri and others (e.g., Hassan Yusuf) cite a Hadith (a report of the deeds and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) stating, "Allah has saved two groups of the Ummah from hellfire; the group that will invade Al-Hind [India] and the group that will be with Isa Ibn-e-Maryam [Jesus] in Damascus." This reference to India seems to be one of the critical doctrinal factors behind the renewed jihadist surge in the Indian Subcontinent and birth of AQIS. Also, it strategically uses different local vernacular languages (e.g. Urdu, Bengali, Tamil) other than Arabic to incite local Muslims to take up arms to defend Islam.

Through its media units, AQIS occasionally attempts to portray its global agenda in tandem with the parent group AQC, while remaining embedded with local concerns. By publishing and distributing the messages in Urdu and Bengali, AQIS has attempted to reach out to Muslims beyond India -- to Bangladesh and Pakistan as well.[45] In November 2014, AQIS released a statement urging jihadi groups in the Middle East to unite in order to fight the US-led coalition war against the jihadists in Syria and Iraq. The statement was issued by spokesman Mahmoud stating that "the latest American aggression on Iraq and Syria has once again proved that America is the head of kufr (infidels) and a leader of a tyrannical system". [46] In one such video message in June 2015, titled 'From France to Bangladesh: The Dust Will Never Settle Down', AQIS covered issues ranging from Charlie Hebdo's cartoons to India's right-wing government and its leader Narendra Modi's speeches. In March 2016, the official media unit of AQIS, As-Sahab (Subcontinent) (or in Urdu: Idara As-Sahab Barr-e-Sagheer), launched a new series of reports on its activities, which includes a new Twitter hashtag. In the first week of March, AQIS-affiliated Twitter accounts began using the new hashtag, which refers to the Al-Hadeed News Report (now defunct) - AQIS's new initiative on social and electronic media.[47]

The Al Qaeda core has been able to stay afloat, proving that Al Sahab web portals have remarkable digital resilience. They are staying online through various means, for example, changing domains frequently with services like Cloudfire or hosting with a New Zealand based domain registrar. The AQIS also showcased its propaganda material through AQC core portal until October 2019. The Al Shahab portal changed three domains in the last one year so far and still shows remarkable virtual resilience.[48] The central portal, which showcases both AQC and AQIS literature, has developed sections for Urdu-language statements to reach out to a broader audience among the South Asian Muslim community, especially in India and Pakistan. AQIS also continues to exploit the messaging app Telegram, despite recent crackdowns on extremist content. Most recently, AQIS has also used Rocket Chat and Telegram, among other social media messaging applications for its propaganda. At present, the Urdu language propaganda statements and audio-visual releases from AQIS

circulated through three dedicated portals such as 'Matboaat-e-jihad', 'Nawa-i-Afghan jihad', or the latest 'Nawa-i-Ghazwa-e-Hind'. 'Al-Sahab' or 'Matboatejihad' web portals.[49]

The group also has dedicated Bengali language propaganda units, and intelligence agencies of both countries have unearthed huge recruitment drive by the group's leaderships in recent past. The Bangladesh unit of AQIS has uploaded a series of videos on a website, intelligence inputs shared with security agencies stated. These videos contain a detailed strategy to plan and execute 'lone wolf' attacks in the broader idea of 'global jihad'. The group also has a team of dedicated Islamic scholars and clerics to create content targeted at India and Bangladesh. In early February 2020 Pro-al-Qaeda Bengali language, Al-Firdaws Media Foundation published two jihadist magazines successively. The first edition of Al-Tarbiyah (Education) which focuses on Jihad and Muslim issues across the world, came out on February 8. After two days, the first edition of Da'wa Ilallah (A Call to Allah) was launched on February 12. Da'wa Ilallah magazine composed of a collection of jihadist Islamist articles posted on the Da'wa Ilallah forum run by al-Firdaws media. Al-Firdaws has been an al-Qaeda and its Bangladesh affiliate Ansar al Islam's propaganda dissemination arm in Bengali language.[50] It also runs and cross-posting propaganda materials on the forum Da'wa Ilallah.[51]

The stream of messages from AQIS has focused on achieving its long-stated goals. A four-part documentary titled "The Message of Islam" from the group released between June 22 and October 1, 2019, echoed its call for violent Jihad to establish Sharia rule. The final instalment in the series, one of the longest, was titled "Is peaceful struggle the path to the establishment of the Sharia?" The video included footage from the Al-Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri who said that it was the religious duty of every Muslim to take up arms and wage jihad against Islam's enemies. The message focused on explaining the role of violent Jihad in achieving religious dominance for Islam. It cited the concept of non-violence for having been propagated by India's freedom fighter Mahatma Gandhi as well as Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, who founded the Islamic Ahmadi movement in what was then British-controlled northern India.

Similarly, the saffron terror messages (starting from November till December 2017), targeting India's right-wing political groups and their purported vigilante violence against minority Muslims, have been published in Urdu, Bengali and English by different media arms of Al-Qaeda, such as the hitherto unknown '1857 Media,' An-Nasr and the official media arm Al-Sahab. They have been distributed through Telegram and other online channels. The AQIS video messages were aimed at vitiating the communal atmosphere in India as they contain clips of supposed anti-Muslim violence and acts of Hindu extremism. One of the saffron terror videos depicted footage of Muslims being forced to praise Hindu gods and denounce Islam. One example used is the Indian Supreme Court ruling against the growing of beards by Muslim soldiers.[52] The videos primarily aimed to evoke anger and resentment in the Muslims serving in the Indian armed forces. The last video in the series released on

December 29 (2017) features mostly hate speeches from leaders of Hindu groups such as Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP).[53]

In August 2019, AQIS resumed publication of the long-standing jihadist magazine, *Nawa-i-Afghan Jihad* (Voice of Afghan Jihad), under a new editorial team. Muthanna Hassan was identified as the present chief of AQIS' newly formed media commission and perhaps succeeded Usama Ibrahim who was killed in a US-led drone strike in 2016. Muthanna Hassan criticised Pakistan by saying that the Pakistani Constitution was "full of contradictions to Sharia rules" and called on clerics to clarify the truth to the people by "exposing sham democratic games". He further reiterated that it is an individual obligation of the people of Afghanistan and those in nearby areas to support the Afghan Taliban until "sufficient strength is achieved to defeat America, its allies and its agents".

The messaging strategy of AQIS also focuses on winning Muslim support for its campaign in the region. For that, it imposed a moratorium on mass-casualty operations, especially concerning those attacks that might kill Muslim civilians. This stance by AQIS and AQC must have enabled them to present themselves as "moderate extremists" before the South Asian Muslim community. To that effect, to garner widespread support and grassroots mobilisation, AQIS issues statements condemning terrorist attacks and violence against civilians. For example, AQIS absolved itself of any role in Pakistan's Peshawar school attack (December 2014) or the Baccha Khan University attack (Charsadda, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) that infuriated the Pakistani military and civil society at large. AQIS Spokesperson Usama Mahmoud was quick to distance AQIS from these violent events in Pakistan. He said, "I want to make it clear that if I were in front of NADRA office, Charsadda University or school, I, myself would stop those assaulters for the defence of Muslims and Jihad e Pakistan", adding, "Jihad & Mujahideen has nothing to do with the crimes like killing innocent Muslims." [54] Similarly, AQIS/Ansar al-Islam Bangladesh distanced itself from the brutal murder of Mahmuda Khanam Mitu, wife of Police official Babul Akhter, in a broad daylight in Chittagong on June 5, 2016. AQIS condemned the murder as impermissible and said it could be a "ploy" to blame the Jihadists.[55]

#### **4. AQIS BEYOND AF-PAK**

AQIS does not have an operational presence in India or Bangladesh. However, since its inception, its leadership has been trying to establish a foothold in these two countries through local and existing militant formations and a grassroots mobilisation strategy through Islamic madrasas. While AQIS achieved some success in penetrating Bangladesh through old Al Qaeda linked groups such as HuJI-B and JMB and the newly organised Ansar al Islam, in India, several attempts have failed in the past. Beyond India's mainland, AQIS has limited operational presence in Kashmir where its local affiliate is Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind (AGH).

However, it is hard to pinpoint any location in both India and Bangladesh where AQIS has distinct operational presence, including hideouts or training grounds.

#### **4.1. AQIS Bangladesh (Ansar al Islam)**

Al Qaeda has a long history of engagement with Bangladesh based Islamist groups and enjoys considerable support from a myriad of radical and militant communities in Bangladesh since at least the late 1990s, especially among the Soviet-Afghan war returnees. Following the turbulent times of the Shahbagh movement of 2013, Al Zawahiri came forward to urge Bangladeshis to support a popular uprising (Intifada) against the incumbent Awami League government and anti-Islamic forces. The uprising could be done by directly supporting those Islamist zealots who attacked free speech secular blog writers. A mid-January 2014 open message from the Al Qaeda leadership urged Bangladeshi Muslims to "confront the crusader onslaught against Islam." The message released by Al Sahab, titled "Bangladesh: Massacre Behind a Wall of Silence", brought out many issues, including the ongoing secularist fervour, alleged atrocities committed by the security forces against pro-Islamic protesters and a call for Sharia-based Caliphate in Bangladesh.

Though AQIS failed to have a physical presence in Bangladesh, it managed to garner support from local militant factions such as Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), which later morphed into Ansar al Islam and became the official wing of AQIS in Bangladesh. On March 1, 2017, the Bangladesh government proscribed Ansar al Islam to be responsible for over a dozen attacks on war crimes trial campaigners, secularists and LGBT rights activists in the country between 2014-2016.[56]

Though the ABT's actual emergence remains in mystery, the organisation came to light in early March 2013 during the interrogation of five students enrolled at a prestigious university in Dhaka.[57] All five members were arrested in connection with the brutal murder of prominent blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider, who played a crucial role in organising the Shahbagh movement. In early April 2013, the detective branch arrested four more ABT members for attempting to murder another blogger, Asif Mohiuddin. Police got their first clue on ABT's existence from the Ansar al-Mujahideen English language forum, an Al Qaeda-affiliated website that posted news of the arrested students under the heading "Five Lions of the Ummah." The brutal killings of secular writers and intellectuals in the country over two years underscored the presence of Al Qaeda's radical faith-based terrorism in Bangladesh. In the press releases that followed every attack, the actions were justified in the following terms: "We will not tolerate insulting our Prophet Muhammad [...] we are targeting those who are insulting our Prophet in the name of atheism." One instance was when AQIS threatened the atheist blog writers by stating, "We do not forget, and we will not forget others who insult our beloved Prophet Muhammad and Allah". In Resurgence, the AQIS also

announced the following: "Let us spare no effort to excise the secularist cancer from the body of the Ummah!"[58]

AQIS' Bangladesh affairs handled by one Mohamed Tariq (Sohel) popularly known among militant fighters as Tariq Bhai in Pakistan.[59] Tariq and five of his accomplices died in Afghanistan's Kandahar.[60] At present, AQIS' Bangladesh unit (Ansar al Islam) is headed by Syed Ziaul Haque, the spokesman, Mufti Abdullah Ashraf and spiritual leaders Mufti Jasim Uddin Rahmani and Tamim Al Adnani.[61] While AQIS Bangladesh chief Ziaul Haque remains a fugitive, Jasim Uddin Rahmani, who considered both Al-Qaeda's Bin Laden and Taliban leaders as his leaders, has been in jail since August 2013. Dhaka police suspect that Tamim Al Adnani fled to Malaysia and is still engaged in preaching and broadcasting his sermons on social media. Another senior commander of AQIS Rezwanul Azad Rana, the chief architects of several targeted attacks, fled Bangladesh following the countrywide crackdown against the Ansarullah militant network. While Rana fled to Malaysia in February 2014, the exact time and other details of al Adnani's escape to Malaysia was not known.[62]

AQIS and Ansar al Islam took responsibilities for almost all attacks against secularists between January 2013 and April 2016.[63] While few early attacks blamed on ABT, subsequently, the offshoot Ansar al Islam took credit for the AQIS inspired violence in the country. The group made their first claim on May 3, 2015, after its supporters hacked six people to death, including blogger Ahmed Rajeeb Haider and science writer Avijit Roy. At least five secular blog writers and publishers died in the targeted attacks unleashed by Ansar al Islam extremists in 2015. They were targeted for their affiliation with a secular social movement that was vocal against extremist Islam and for their secularist and progressive ideas and writings. Notable among them were Avijit Roy, Washiqur Rehman Babu, Ananta Bijoy Das, Niloy Neel and Faisal Arefin Dipan.[64] In April 2016 three more people were targeted. AQIS / Ansar-al Islam militants killed Xulhaz Mannan and Samir Mahbub Tonoy, gay rights activists and editor of Roopbaan, a Bengali language magazine on the LGBT issues (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender). These militants also killed secular blogger Nazimuddin Samad. Ansar-al Islam group's spokesman Mufti Abdulla Asharaf issued a statement claiming responsibilities for the gruesome murders of Mannan and Tanoy. The statement said that the deceased 'were the pioneers of practising and promoting homosexuality in Bangladesh since 1998 [...] with the help of their masters, the U.S. crusaders and its Indian allies.' [65]

Investigating agencies in Bangladesh are apprehensive that fugitive Ansar al Islam and AQIS members may regroup and resurge by co-opting existing or dormant militant formations such as JMB or HUJI-B. This apprehension arose in Bangladesh in October 2019 when several arrested Ansar al-Islam militants confessed to having plans to merge their operations with Neo JMB (faction which supports Islamic State ideals).[66] However, after months of inactivity, in February and June 2020, AQIS released online Bengali language contents to

instigate people to launch 'lone wolf' attacks against the Indian government, security agencies, Hindutva Right-wing leaders.

#### **4.2. Alliance with Rohingya Insurgency**

AQIS and Ansar al-Islam both extended their support to Harakah al-Yakin or the Faith Movement, a Rohingya militant group fighting against Myanmar's military forces and radical Buddhists since 2015.[67] The Rohingya group that later morphed into Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) is led by a firebrand militant leader named Hafiz Tohar (Abu Ammar al Junooni) and is engaged in attacks and armed raids on border posts in the Rakhine state. Al Qaeda's Arabian Peninsula affiliate also urged AQIS fighters and the Muslim youth of Bangladesh to join the fight to avenge the Rohingya persecution. Al Qaeda's al-Malahem media foundation released a statement by Khaled Batarfi which urged Muslims of the South and East Asian regions (Bangladesh, India, Indonesia and Malaysia) to support Rohingya Muslims against the "enemies of Allah." [68] However, until now, information remains sketchy to prove that Ansar al Islam or AQIS fighters are involved in the ARSA-led insurgency in Myanmar.

#### **4.3. AQIS Shadows in India**

The AQIS' "code of conduct" document depicted its long-term Islamist objectives and noted its belief that, "[the] Indian State is the fundamental obstacle in the formation of an Islamic India." Even though the nascent AQIS unit in India is currently in disarray, Al-Qaeda's jihadist ideology has helped consolidate militant and extremist elements in the hinterlands of India.

Much before the advent of AQIS, the Al Qaeda Core had renewed its efforts to gain a foothold within India's minority Muslim community. In June 2013, Maulana Asim Umar, the future chief of AQIS, released a video titled, "Why there is no storm in your ocean" that called upon the country's Muslims to join the global Jihad. Two months later, Zawahiri issued specific guidelines for Jihad and Da'wa that endorsed the right of militants to fight Indians in Kashmir. The messages released against the backdrop of growing Islamist extremism in India spearheaded by the Indian Mujahideen (IM).

After the formation of AQIS, Asim Umar made several attempts to penetrate India to establish an Ansar al Islam Bangladesh type of local unit to carry out AQIS's Jihad on Indian soil. However, AQIS and Asim Umar have achieved little success in this effort. With a string of AQIS related arrests in North India in 2015 and 2016, including the supposed leader of AQIS Mohammad Asif of Uttar Pradesh, Al Qaeda's plan was exposed and foiled. Along with Asif, who was reportedly in charge of training and recruitment in India, several other AQIS influenced Islamic clerics such as Abdul Rehman Khan, and Zafar Masood were

apprehended from Uttar Pradesh and Odisha states. Asif was in touch with Al Qaeda operatives through social media and eventually met AQIS chief Maulana Asim Umar in Pakistan in 2013. Asif's past journeys to Saudi Arabia and Pakistan and a secret meeting with Asim Umar in Pakistan, possibly at Miramshah (North Waziristan) or Karachi, formalised his induction into the Al Qaeda's jihadi space. Asif, along with two other Indians, underwent ideological and militant training in Waziristan subsequently. According to Delhi Police, Muhammed Asif underwent religious training in Pakistan's Waziristan and highly resented the US-led drone strikes and incidents like the death of the then chief of Tehrik-e- Taliban, Hakimullah Mehsud, in November 2013.

Even though there are some contradictory reports in the media about the travel details of Asif, especially whether he travelled to Saudi Arabia first or reached Pakistan via Iran, the police interrogations confirmed that he took the Iran–Pakistan route. By September 2014, Asif was back in India and started scouting talented recruits for AQIS' India branch. However, with his arrest, AQIS' India venture faced a significant roadblock and exposed Al Qaeda's grassroots network.

**4.3.1. Base Movement (BM):** In southern India, the so-called "Base Movement" (B.M.) came to public light with a series of low yield bombings in 2016. At least five low-intensity blasts targeting law courts occurred in 2016: in Chittoor, Andhra Pradesh (April 7); Kollam and Mysore, Karnataka (June 15 and August 1, respectively); Nellore, Andhra Pradesh (September 12); and Malappuram, Kerala (November 1).

Little is known about this Al-Qaeda affiliate's origin, but it appears to have existed in some form since January 2015. Shortly after the attack on the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo, a threatening letter bearing the group's name was sent to the Tamil daily newspaper Dinamalar. It read: "Yesterday Paris – Charlie Hebdo, Tomorrow Dinamalar" apparently indicating a planned attack like the one in Paris.[69] B.M.'s name surfaced again in January 2016 when similar threatening letters were sent to state authorities in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. One of these letters issued a threat against the scheduled visit of the then French President Francois Hollande to India. [70]

The letters indicated BM's threats to be a "retaliation for injustices meted out to the Muslim community in India." The B.M. threatened to avenge the hanging of Yakub Memon, the man convicted for 1993 Mumbai bombings, and the June 2004 killing of Lashkar-e-Taiba's Ishrat Jahan in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. The letters were signed "Base Movement – Kovai," providing an early lead to investigators — Kovai is the local name of Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu. In this connection, India's elite anti-terrorism agency, the National Investigation Authority, arrested several suspects. The recent courthouse bombings were said to be linked to remnants of the banned Al Qaeda inspired al-Ummah militant group and radical Student

Islamic Movement of India (SIMI). Investigations have not found any direct links with AQIS or the arrested operatives of Base Movement.[71]

**4.3.2. Ansar Ghazwat-ul Hind:** Kashmir remains the centre point of most of Al Qaeda's propaganda videos and press releases, even though with a limited presence on the ground. Until August 2016, the AQIS never intended to penetrate the contested Kashmiri theatre. However, it issued statements highlighting the death of Hizbul Mujahideen (HM), a Kashmir based militant group, commander Burhan Wani to unite Muslim youths within Al Qaeda's fold. Following the release of the "Code of Conduct "document in June 2017, the AQIS formally established and endorsed a new jihadist group, Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind (AGH, Supporters of Holy War in India), in Kashmir under the Hizbul Mujahideen renegade militant, Zakir Rashid Bhat (Musa), along with a media wing named Al-Hurr. The formation of the new outfit was announced through a statement on July 27 by the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF), an Al-Qaeda-affiliated information network.[72] Inspired by the AQIS code of conduct guidelines, AGH leader Zakir Musa incited the Kashmir youth to carry out attacks against Indian army personnel and urged Muslims across India and Kashmir to carry out lone-wolf attacks. However, the AGH has suffered massive setbacks, and most of the leaders died in counterterror operations in Jammu and Kashmir, including Zakir Musa himself in May 2019 and his deputy Hamid Lelhari in October 2019.[73][74]

Kashmir militants affiliated with AGH were also found to be fighting alongside AQIS and Taliban in Afghanistan's Ghazni province in the past. One such militant named Abdul Haseeb al-Kashmiri died in Ghazni. AGH linked social media channels reported Abdul Haseeb's death on June 20, 2019, declaring, "We announce the Martyrdom of our beloved brother Abdul Haseeb al-Kashmiri, a Muhajir Mujahid of J&K in the ranks of AQIS who was martyred in an American raid in Ghazni, Afghanistan".[75] Its present chief and spokesperson Osama Mahmoud continues to urge Muslims of the region to wage Jihad in Kashmir. In January 2020, Osama Mahmoud looked beyond Kashmir, urging Muslims in India to wage Jihad against government "oppressors." In a 27-minute audio-visual presentation titled 'Message of love and brotherhood in the service of Muslims of India', he cited several incidents often exploited for propaganda purposes within the jihadist community to raise anti-Indian sentiments. The oft-repeated events include the 2002 Gujarat communal riots, the recent Citizenship law, and the Indian Supreme Court's recent order to build a Hindu temple on the site of a demolished mosque. Mahmoud used these events to incite Muslims to wage Jihad and fight back right-wing aggressions. He went a step further to compare the situation of Indian Muslims to that of the Rohingya in Myanmar's Rakhine State. He compared their relative lack of armed resistance. In this message, Usama Mahmoud charted a five-point plan to protect and empower Muslims in India, exhorting them to fight back against Hindu aggressors and wage jihad. [76] However, irrespective of AGH's declining posturing, AQIS media continuously focusses on Kashmir and post-March



2020 when the group publicly vowed to move its focus and operational base towards India and Kashmir to wage final battles.

**4.4. AQIS and Transnational Threat:** Like its parent group, AQIS nourishes intention to attack the US and Western countries. It intermittently issues threats to countries beyond its operational purview and capability to launch an attack, for example threatening the United States or the Netherlands. In March 2016, it encouraged attacks on US Naval bases that protect oil companies, terminals and pipelines and launched attacks against Muslim nations in Asia. One pro-Bangladeshi Ansar al Islam Facebook page urged militants in the United States to attack educational institutions in March 2016. The same year in April, a group claiming affiliation with AQIS threatened New Jersey Home Land security officials on Facebook.

In a similar vein, AQIS and Taliban propaganda units also issued several threats to the Netherlands' parliamentary party PVV (Party of Freedom) and its leader Geert Wilders for organising a cartoon contest insulting Prophet Muhammad's. This initiative by Wilders had sparked massive protests in Pakistan as well. On September 23, 2018, the Al-Qaeda media distribution unit the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF) released an English translation of AQIS statement originally released in Urdu on September 11, 2018, accusing the Netherlands and other western governments of promoting "insults" to the Prophet under the pretext of freedom of expression. [77]

The December 2019 issue of Nawa-i-Afghan Jihad magazine eulogised Pensacola, Florida shooter (the Saudi Royal Air Force officer) and incited attacks against U.S. soldiers. The editorial in that issue of the Urdu-language magazine hailed the Saudi officer Muhammad al-Shamrani as a "jihadist hero" and called on military officers in Muslim countries to follow suit by targeting the U.S. soldiers. Muhammad al-Shamrani, the Saudi gunman, who was under training at the base, killed three sailors and wounded eight others before he was shot dead. Neither al-Qaeda nor IS claimed responsibility for the Florida shooting. Again, the AQIS editorial in the magazine also paid tribute Omar Dabaa Ilyas, the Muslim man who saved a copy of the Koran from being burned during a recent protest in Norway in November 2019. It said Ilyas had made Muslims proud by attacking an "infidel" who was burning a copy of the Koran. [78]

Despite these ambitious threat messages, the AQIS has never carried out any attacks or inspired similar strikes in locations outside South Asia. However, it continues to incite Muslims in Western countries to carry out lone-wolf attacks.

## 5. LEADERSHIP PROFILES

### 5.1. Asim Umar (Sanaul Haq, AQIS Founding Emir, Deceased)

Asim Umar was the founding chief of AQIS. He died in a September 23 (2019) operation that targeted a Taliban compound in the Musa Qala district of Helmand Province. Before joining Al-Qaeda as the head of the Shari'a Committee of Pakistan, Umar had worked with the Kashmir-centric Deobandi group, Harkat-ul Mujahideen, under the leadership of Fazl-ur Rehman Khalil. Umar reportedly also worked with Harkat-ul Jihad al-Islami (HuJI) and Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) for a while.

Asim Umar was a regular contributor to the Taliban's Azan magazine, produced by the pro-Taliban Abtalul Islam Media Foundation, since its very inception. Through his writings, one could quickly assess Umar's deep understanding of the extremist interpretation of Islam and the level of educational rigour and indoctrination he had gone through in his career. His perspectives on Kashmir reflected Al-Qaeda's world view. He emphatically wrote in one of the Azan issues, "Kashmir is ours... In the presence of oppression in Kashmir, how can the Indian Hindus be given peace?" Asim Umar had strong command over multiple languages, including Urdu, Pashto, English and Arabic. He also served in the Pakistan Taliban's and Al-Qaeda's propaganda units for some time before joining AQIS.

Umar's literary works reflected and revolved around opposition to Western democracy, the rule of Shari'a and the path to martyrdom. Like Al-Qaeda's core ideology, he too endorsed US-centric armed Jihad by regarding the United States as the main obstacle towards establishing the Caliphate. He authored several books on Islamic eschatology that revolved around the final annihilation of life, resurrection and reckoning. Umar's body of works mostly touches upon apocalyptic scenarios based on Islamic legends and mythology, of which many are available on the internet and in book stores across the Subcontinent. His notable works include 'Teesri Jang-e Azeem aur Dajjal' (The Third World War and the False Messiah Anti-Christ), 'Bermuda Tikon Aur Dajjal' (The Bermuda Triangle and the Anti-Christ), 'Blackwater: Army of Anti-Christ' (about the U.S.-based private security contractor) and 'Imam Mehdi ke Dost aur Dushman' (Enemies and Friends of Imam Mehdi), among others. His writing in the Resurgence, titled "The future of Muslims in India," attacked the Hindu domination and violence aimed at the Muslim minorities in the country. He referenced the numerous communal riots that have taken place in post-independence India, in order to ignite a sense of anger within the minority community. [79]

Following the Musa Qala (Helmand) raid in September 2019 in which Asim Umar died, Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security detained Umar's wife Bibi Sarwat, a Pakistani national, for further investigations into the life and working of Asim Umar and the AQIS Network in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

### **5.2. Usama Mahmoud: (Present Emir, Spokesperson)**

There is little or no information about his location and personal details, though he remains the voice of AQIS in the region. Following the death of Asim Umar, Usama Mahmoud seems to have taken charge of the Al Qaeda's regional branch. Mahmoud is one of the core founding members of AQIS and is serving as its spokesperson since 2014. After the death of AQIS Deputy Chief Ustad Ahmed Farooq in January 2015, Usama Mahmoud was elevated to the rank of the deputy, concurrently overseeing Urdu language propaganda affairs for al-Qaeda. His role within AQIS can be assessed through statements and audio-visual releases from the al-Sahab (Subcontinent) media foundation and the online portals of the group such as 'Matboaat-e-jihad', 'Nawa-i-Afghan jihad', or the latest 'Nawa-i-Ghazwa-e-Hind'. He has also shared several messages through audio-visual publishing platforms such as Islami Dunya and social media channels such as Twitter and Telegram.

Pakistan media once reported his death in April 2017. Reports at that time in the Urdu media primarily focused on AQIS leader Asim Umar's erroneous statement about Usama Mahmoud's death (he was also called Osama Ibrahim in the AQIS communique). He reportedly died during a raid by US forces in Zabul province in Afghanistan in September 2016, on the eve of Eid-ul-Adha.[80] No further investigations were undertaken when his name again surfaced in AQIS propaganda.

Though not much information is available about Mahmoud in the open-source or through Al Qaeda's media releases, it is known that he is from Pakistan and has extensive battle experience working under Taliban and Al Qaeda formations. Usama Mahmoud is primarily known through AQIS statements and audio-visuals from the Al Sahab media. According to him, AQIS is focused on creating an "Islamic subcontinent" and is a part of the global jihadi movement. He too ranked the United States as the primary enemy along with the alliance of 'Crusaders, Zionists, Mulhids [apostates], polytheists, and secularists'. [81] Like other leaders of his group, Mahmoud owes his allegiance to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Besides the US, he considers India as a second priority target for its alliance with the US and Israel. At various times, through statements and interviews, Osama Mahmoud, who is well versed in the Urdu language, reiterates Kashmir as a focal point in the ongoing Jihad.[82]

### **5.3. Ustad Ahmad Farouk (Deputy Emir, Deceased)**

Like Asim Umar, Ahmed Farouq was involved with the Taliban and Al Qaeda's outreach programmes since 2010. His name came to light when his interview titled "Jihad in Pakistan – Why?" appeared in July 2010 in Al-Sahab. He oversaw Al Qaeda's Da'wah and the Urdu Media Department for Pakistan.[83] Responsible for several Islamic Jihad related

publications and press releases for AQIS, Ahmed Farouk was appointed as Deputy Chief of AQIS in September 2014. Farouq (also known as Raja Muhammad Salman) was from Islamabad, Pakistan. According to the AQIS spokesman, Farouk was an Islamic scholar with immense knowledge of Shariah and Islamic jurisprudence.[84] He died in a US airstrike in North Waziristan, Pakistan on January 15, 2015.

#### **5.4. Syed Mohammad Ziaul Haque (AQIS Bangladesh)**

Mohammad Ziaul Haque is the chief of the Bangladesh chapter of AQIS. With a bounty of 20 lakh BDT (approximately \$25,000) on his head, Syed Mohammad Ziaul Haque remains one of the sought-after militant fugitives in Bangladesh. He has masterminded subversive militant violence in the country, including the targeted killings of secular bloggers between 2014-2016. A disgraced former Bangladesh army major posted with the Mirpur-based Engineer Corps, Ziaul Haque's name came up for the first time in December 2011 for conspiring with and instigating fellow army men to carry out a coup d'état against the Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League government.

Ziaul Haque is the first such military-trained officer in Bangladesh to join the ranks of highly radicalised Islamists. In June 2016, Dhaka police received information about 200 trained Ansar-al Islam militants who were active in the country waiting to take orders from Ziaul Haque. One arrested Ansar-al Islam Bangladesh member, identified Ziaul Haque's overall role as a strategist and trainer within the group. He also confessed that Ziaul Haque, a master of disguise, had frequented Ansar's militant training at Tongi (Ghazipur). Recent police investigation reports suggested that Major Ziaul may not have been involved in organising activities of Ansar-al-Islam and he is still untraceable. [85]

#### **5.5. Tamim al Adnani (AQIS, Bangladesh)**

Tamim Al Adnani is a fugitive AQIS leader and the spiritual head of Ansar al Islam (also Ansarullah Bangla Team-ABT) group. In November 2014, Bangladesh police gathered information about him by intercepting a skype chat between two militants in Pakistan and Bangladesh.[86] Although Tamim Al Adnani's real name or identity remains a mystery, according to the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) of Bangladesh police, he is one of the five founding members of ABT and among the top three leaders of ABT who is presently hiding in Malaysia and engaged in preaching and broadcasting jihadi sermons through audio-visual message sharing.[87] The other fugitives were Maj (sacked) Syed Ziaul Haque and Rezwanul Azad Rana. While Rana, a death row convict, was deported from Malaysia in connection with the 2013 killing of blogger Ahmed Rajib in early 2017, Tamim Adnani and Ziaul Haque are still untraceable.

There is limited information about early life and education of Tamim Adnani in Bangladesh. However, various interrogation reports shed lights on his entry into the world of Islamic extremism and Jihad. In 2014, the ABT's media branch chief Morshed Islam spilt some vital information about the elusive Tamim Adnani. According to him, Tamim Adnani and Jasimuddin Rahmani have close ties with Jordan-born British citizen Sheikh Abu Issa Ali, who was the leader of international Jamaat-ul-Muslimeen. During Abu Issa's visit to Bangladesh in 2002, both Tamim Adnani and Jasim Uddin had interactions with him, and later they all travelled to Pakistan's Karachi on the invitation of online extremist forum Bab-ul Islam. These events perhaps opened avenues for both visiting Bangladeshi Islamist clerics to virtual jihad propagation.[88] It should be noted that Bab-ul Islam online forum was a pioneer in promoting and hosting Al Qaeda's jihadi literature and related extremist content on the internet in regional languages, including Urdu and Bengali.

Tamim al Adnani in one his Bengali audio messages in late 2014 explained why he joined Al Qaeda and why a true Muslim should only join this terror group. With the ultimate aim to recruit young Bengalis into Ansarullah or Al Qaeda's fold, he gave at least 12 reasons for the same. According to him, everybody should join Al Qaeda since it has chosen the path of armed Jihad to defend persecuted and oppressed Muslims across the globe (Ummah). Tamim Adnani praised Osama bin Laden and narrated how bin Laden renounced a life of luxury in Saudi Arabia to wage Jihad to protect Muslims in the world. Invoking Qur'anic verses, Tamim Adnani justified Al Qaeda's pursuit of 'jihad' and 'Qital' as ways to establish and defend the religion. In his audio message, he raised several Islamic eschatological epithets to defend and justify Al Qaeda's version of Jihad citing, for example, the Day of Resurrection, final Victorious Group (At-Taifatul Mansura), and Al Ghuraba (Strangers or foreign fighters). Among other things, he said that Al Qaeda indeed follows the Salafist creed (Aqeedah) of Al Wala Wal Bara (Loyalty and Rejection). One of his arguments for joining Al Qaeda was, according to him, the group respects and remembered true Islamic warriors and scholars and wages jihad following the paths shown by them. He named several Islamic scholars who were part of Al Qaeda over the years and guided the organisation starting from Abdullah Azam, Yahya al-Libby, Sami al-Oraydi, Anwar al-Awlaki and also Asim Umar, the first leader of Al Qaeda's South Asian branch.[89]

Tamim Al Adnani has been successfully producing and disseminating his Islamist contents through social media and audio-visual files sharing networks including YouTube, Facebook and SoundCloud. He regularly talks about defending Islam or exhorting Bangladeshi youths to fight against the government or gives monologues about the final battle of Hind (Gazwatul Hind) or civil wars in Yemen, Syria or atrocities against Rohingyas (Myanmar) or Uighurs (China) through two of his dedicated YouTube Channels -- Ummah Network and a relatively new Ummah News. [90]

## 6. OUTLOOK

There are usually two vital questions often asked when it comes to any jihadi group and threats emanating from them. First, is the group still capable of violence, and second, what does the hold for the group and for the region it operates? These questions are equally important for an assessment of AQIS as a jihadi group. Over six years of its resilient existence, why did it fail to carry out more significant strikes in its areas of operation? Even if it did not succeed in carrying out any major attacks, how has the group sustained itself for several years with intermittent leadership deaths in the face of targeted counter-terror efforts? The answers are vast and complex.

First, AQIS is still resilient and has successfully spread its ideals through grassroots networks and likeminded existing militant formations across the Subcontinent. The major strength of AQIS, for that matter AQC, remains the Taliban formations in Afghanistan and its factions operating in Pakistan's tribal areas. It is certain that without the Taliban's exiting jihadi infrastructure, training grounds, numerous hideouts and physical protection, AQIS would not have survived all these years as a regional jihadi force. Though it has succeeded in co-opting local militant formations in Pakistan or Bangladesh, it has not succeeded in developing any safe havens in other countries beyond Afghanistan and to some extent Pakistan. Therefore, the Taliban's longevity facilitates AQIS' staying in power.

Second, the strength of AQIS lies in its propaganda and not in firepower. It is clear that though the AQIS initiated audacious plots in Pakistan, it chooses to remain less violent, avoiding mass fatality terror attacks. Even if a direct attack against the US or any European nation remains a low probability at present, AQIS maintains a steady stream of propaganda power to incite attacks against these countries. Its grassroots outreach through Islamic seminars and clerics with the idea to establish a Caliphate following Sharia seems to resonate with disconnected Muslim populations in the Subcontinent and elsewhere.

Third, AQIS will continue to see and exploit opportunities in India (Kashmir) and Bangladesh to garner popular support. The existing societal cleavages (Hindu-Muslim divide and sectarian divide within Islam) and intermittent political and social turbulence will benefit AQIS in the region in achieving its objectives propagated through its Code of Conduct document and other literature.

Lastly, AQIS will remain a regional force and continue to recruit and mobilise local Muslims, thereby indirectly strengthening the Al Qaeda Core as a leading transnational force. It will also attempt to provide spiritual and physical support to local Muslim unrests and insurgencies. Both in its short and long-term objectives, AQIS will not transcend its area of operations and would continue to influence a specific populace that can identify itself with AQIS' stated 'struggle'.

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## APPENDIX- A CHRONOLOGY OF MAJOR EVENTS

### 2020

**March 21:** AQIS calls US-Taliban deal as victory and a magnificent one. It also announced to change the magazine's name as Nawai -Gahzwatul Hind. According to the magazine, Kashmir will be the epicentre of AQIS jihad.

**March 07:** AQIS mourns death of al-Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula (Yemen) leader Qasim al-Raymi, The statement with the phrase "O [Jerusalem] Aqsa, we are coming", was published on the website of al-Qaeda's media wing al-Sahab and matboaatejihad.net .

**January 23:** AQIS present chief laid out a five-point plan to protect Muslims from the "ruthless storm" and "volcano under their feet" through Al Sahab media.

### 2019

**December 27:** Pakistan police have unearthed a media cell of the AQIS in Gujranwala, Punjab and arrested five members including Asim Akbar, the in-charge of the media cell.

**November 13:** AQIS's Urdu-language magazine criticised Indian Supreme court ruling that would allow Hindus to build Ram temple at the site of a demolished mosque. It called for jihad as a means to end alleged injustice against Muslims in India.

**October 22:** Hamid Lelhari (Haroon Abbas) the leader of Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind, (AGH), AQIS affiliate in Kashmir who succeeded Zakir Musa in June 2019 was killed along with two of his associates in Awantipura, Pulwama district in Kashmir.

**September 23:** AQIS chief Asim Umar along with six other senior leaders killed in a US led raid in Musa Qala, Helmand Province, Afghanistan.

**June 24:** Talat Mahmood of AQIS was among the three militants killed in Karachi an encounter with police. A former member of Taliban faction Jamaat-ul Ahrar (JuA), Talat's name was associated with several attacks against policemen and targeted killings in Karachi including the Safoora Goth tragedy in May 2015 and social activist Sabeen Mahmud's murder in April 2015 in Karachi.

**June 15:** AQIS / Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind militant Abdul Haseeb al-Kashmiri was killed during air raid by the US troops in Ghazni, Afghanistan. A Telegram channel that supports Al Qaeda and AGH (@Mnasireen of AGH) announced his death on June 20.

**May 24:** AQIS affiliated Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind leader Zakir Musa was killed in Tral region of Kashmir. Former Hizbul Mujahideen (HM) commander Zakir Musa was AGH/AQIS leader in Kashmir since July 27, 2017.

**March 13:** The Afghan military offensive killed 31 members of AQIS including nine suicide bombers in Ghazni province. The airstrikes targeted a compound in the district of Giro that was run by AQIS commander Qari Arif.

## 2018

**November 19:** AQIS Karachi Unit chief Umar Jalal Chandio was arrested from Gulshan-I-Iqbal, Karachi, Pakistan.

**June 11:** Suspected AQIS/ Ansar al Islam terrorists murdered Shajahan Bachchu, a secularist writer and political activist in Munshiganj, in central Bangladesh.

**April 23:** Senior AQIS / Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) leader Hazrat Abbas was killed in an airstrike in Sherzad district of Nangarhar, Afghanistan. NATO's Resolute Support Mission (RSM) informed that Hazrat Abbas led militants were involved in several deadly attacks and kidnappings on both sides of the Afghanistan/ Pakistan borders.

## 2017

**September 29:** Karachi police informed that AQIS commander Mohammed Amir Sharif of Faisalabad, Pakistan with links with Egyptian militant Hamza Dhanrwei. was killed in an encounter. An electrical engineer by profession, Amir Sharif was an expert in drone technology, and he was preparing a technology to control drones and hit targets for the AQIS.

**January 08:** Two AQIS militants conducted a grenade attack and indiscriminate firing on the North Nazimabad Police Complex in Pakistan's Karachi. One person killed and several injured in the incident.

## 2016

**October 09:** Karachi police have killed three AQIS militants Noorul Amin, Abdul Ghani and Saeedullah who were part AQIS-Burmi unit (Burma) under Abu Zar Burmi. The slain militants were involved in the killings of army soldiers, police and member of the Ahmadiyya community.

**April 25:** LGBT rights activists Xullaz Manna and Mahbub Tonoy were killed by Ansar- al Islam-Bangladesh / AQIS militants in the Capital Dhaka (Bangladesh). AQIS claimed responsibility because both worked for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and 'promoted homosexuality' in Bangladesh.

**April 06:** Secular Activist Nazimuddin Samad was killed by Ansar al Islam-Bangladesh militants shouting "Allahu Akbar" (God is Greatest). They attacked Samad with Machete and fired few gun shots on a busy road near Dhaka's Jagannath University.

## 2015

**October 31:** Publisher Faisal Arefin Dipan was killed at his office . Three others including the publisher Ahemdaur Rashid Tutul were injured in the attack.

**October 11:** AQIS Shura member Sheikh Imran Ali Siddiqi (Haji Waliullah) was killed in a US drone strike in Pakistan's Khyber region.



**August 07:** Blogger Niladri Chaterjee (Niloy Neel) was killed in his Dhaka residence by group of four armed AAI-Bangladesh militants.

**May 12:** Secular activist and logger Ananta Bijoy Das was killed in Sylhet city. The attackers were found to be linked with Ansarullah Bangla Team, a unit of Ansar al-Islam, Bangladesh, an affiliate of al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS).

**April 29:** University of Karachi (KU) Assistant professor, Dr. Waheed-ur-Rehman was killed by five militants affiliated with AQIS near the Karachi Institute of Heart Diseases in Federal B Area of the city. Days later (On May 2), AQIS claimed responsibility through a 9 minute video message. AQIS's chief Asim Umar threatened to execute more people who have been committing blasphemy.

**April 14:** AQIS Karachi unit chief Noor-ul-Hasan and his deputy his deputy Usman were killed in an encounter in Orangi town, Pakistan. Noor-ul-Hasan was expert bomb maker mostly in assembling VBIED (vehicle-borne improvised explosive device).

**March 30:** Secular blogger and writer Oyashiqur Rahman was killed in Dhaka.

**February 26:** Avijit Roy, a prominent Bangladeshi-American scientist and secular blogger at Mukto Mano was killed by AQIS/ AaI-Bangladesh militants at Dhaka University, Dhaka.

**January 15:** AQIS deputy chief and founding member Ahmad Farooq was killed in a US drone strike in the Wacha Dara area of Pakistan's South Waziristan. Along with Farook, at least seven AQIS militants including foreign fighters (e.g. Uzbeks), were killed in the same strike.

**January 5:** Qari Imran, one of the AQIS senior commanders was killed in Wacha Basti in the Datta Khel area of Pakistan's North Waziristan.

## 2014

**December 01:** AQIS spokesman Usama Mahmoud claimed in a statement that AQIS was in operation since 2013 and engaged in targeting American interests, the Pakistani Army, the Pakistani Police and 'anti-Islam thugs. He also claimed AQIS militants have killed 15 people so far who were known for their anti-Islam activities, murder of religious scholars, and extortion of Muslim merchants."

**November 9-11:** Two senior AQIS commanders identified as Dr. Sarbaland (Abu Khalid) and Adil Abdul Quoos were also killed by US drone strikes on Pakistan-Afghanistan border areas.

## APPENDIX-B

LIST OF MAJOR STATEMENTS AND  
MEDIA RELEASES OF AQIS: 2014-2020**2014**

**September 4:** AQIS Spokesman identifies Jihad against America among primary goals.

**September 05:** AQIS Leader incites for Jihad, expresses determination to extend fighting from Pakistan to Bangladesh, Burma, and India.

**September 09:** AQIS Spokesman clarifies scope of its Jihad as entire Indian Subcontinent.

**September 17:** AQIS explains motivations for Targeting U.S. Navy in Karachi, considers America its primary enemy.

**September 30:** AQIS clarifies targets of Karachi Naval Yard attack as U.S., Indian Navies.

**October 19:** Al-Qaeda's media house Al-Sahab launched AQIS mouthpiece, English-language magazine Resurgence (No.1) under the editorship of Hassaan Yusuf.

**2015**

**June 25:** AQIS published a special issue of its English-language magazine Resurgence (No.2) featuring a lengthy interview with Adam Gadahn, discussing range of topics on the global jihad movement.

**October 31:** Bangladesh division of AQIS allegedly claims attacks on secular writers and publishers in Dhaka

**December 03:** AQIS releases video on September 2014 Karachi Naval Yard attack.

**2016**

**April 20:** The Global Islamist Media Front (GIMF) released an English translation of AQIS video titled 'Jihadi Memories 8- Martyrs of AQIS' via Telegram.

**May 04:** Ansar al-Islam-Bangladesh /AQIS alleges American plot to spread homosexuality in the Country.

**June 01:** AQIS leader cautions fighters against harming innocent Muslims, "Severing" their connection to the People.

**June 10:** Ansar al-Islam-Bangladesh calls Mahmuda Aktar's murder impermissible, condemns "Ploy" to blame Jihadists.

**June 03:** AQIS Spokesman condemns attacks at Bacha Khan University, Nadra Office as unlawful, harmful to public image.

**June 16:** AQIS Spokesman calls Pakistani Muslims to fight America and Pakistani Army in a message eulogizing Taliban leader

**July 03:** AQIS leader incites Indian muslims to rise up, carry out Lone-Wolf attacks on administrative and Police officers.

**August 08:** AQIS video chant condemns Pakistan Army, calls soldiers to join ranks.

**August 10:** AQIS video shows training footage from Qari Imran Camp, Afghanistan.

**September 21:** AQIS Spokesman urges Kashmiris to establish Jihadi Movement, incites Muslims in region to fight.

**September 21:** New video message from AQIS: "The Believers 1: In the Memory of the Martyred AQIS Mujahideen from the Battles of North Waziristan Operation"

## 2017

**December 27:** AQIS shows clip of Muslim forced to accept Hinduism in 3rd episode of "Saffron Terror."

**December 18:** AQIS fighter urges Muslims of Chittagong to fight in Myanmar to help Rohingya Muslims.

**November 24:** AQIS Spokesman calls regional Muslims to Act for Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar.

**July 2:** AQIS Video shows July 2015 suicide bombing at Pakistani Military Post in D.I. Khan, Pakistan.

**June 25:** AQIS publishes its "Code of Conduct," declares U.S. citizens and interests in Pakistan its "Foremost Priority".

## 2018

**September 15:** AQIS incites Lone-Wolf attacks in West in revenge for insults to Prophet Muhammad.

**July 27:** AQIS video focuses on fighters involved in August 2012 Attack at Minhas Airbase in Kamra, Pakistan.

**September 14:** AQIS gives eulogy for Jalaluddin Haqqani, of Haqqani Network in Afghanistan.

**January 15:** AQIS fighter urges Bangladeshi Jihadists not to Back "Apostate Armies," cites Story of Pakistani Army.

**January 2:** AQIS directs 4th Episode of "Saffron Terror" to Bangladeshi Muslims. Released video for Urdu chant promoting cause of Kashmiris, inciting against India.

## 2019

**October 17- November 6:** As-Sahab/AQIS released a series (17) of audio files titled "Lesson Series of Surat al-Anfal (spoils of war)" facilitated by Ustaz Ahmad Faruq.

**October 12:** AQIS Spokesman urges regional Muslims support Jihad in Kashmir, attack Indian government and military personnel.

**October 08:** Afghan Taliban rejects report on Death of AQIS leader in Helmand province.

**October 2:** AQIS promotes violent imposition of Shariah rule in final episode of documentary on Pakistan.

**August 26:** AQIS acknowledges ownership of Nawa-i- Afghan Jihad magazine, remarks on future after arrest of the Editor.

**August 13:** AQIS eulogizes TNSM (Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammad) founder Sufi Muhammad, Jihadi cleric Noor al-Hadi

**June 06:** AQIS Spokesman eulogizes slain AGH-Kashmir leader Zakir Musa.

## 2020

**April 24:** AGH- "They full-filled their pledge: On the martyrdom of the Mujahideen in Melhura Shopian"

**February 12:** AQIS linked al-Firdaws Media released "Call to Allah Magazine - Issue 1 in Bengali language.

**February 13:** AQIS released a video "Hafiz Suhaib Ghouri - 'Testimony: The Highest Honor In The Ways of Love", A Conversation On The Greatness of Jihad and Martyrs From A Meeting With Mujahideen through Al Sahab media.

**February 08:** "O Aqsa ! We are Coming!" Statement on the Martyrdom of Al Shaykh Abu Qasim Al Reimi. Reimi was emir of the Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

**January 23:** AQIS Chief and Spokesman Usama Mahmoud decries Indian Anti-Islam Citizenship Law, Urges Muslims Revolt and Embrace Jihad.

*(Source: SITE Intelligence (<https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/>), MEMRI (<https://www.memri.org>), TRAC ([www.trackingterrorism.org](http://www.trackingterrorism.org)) AQIS affiliated Web portals (e.g. [Matboaatejihad.net](http://Matboaatejihad.net) and [Nawaighazwaehind.com](http://Nawaighazwaehind.com)) and Social media platforms (e.g Telegram and Rocket Chat) .*

**Disclaimer:** The Aim of these two above mentioned 'Appendices' are to provide selected major statements, press releases and attacks by the AQIS and its affiliated groups. However, it is not a comprehensive listing of either attacks or statements during AQIS campaign.

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