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# **Resurgence of Al-Qaeda in South Asia Post-US Drawdown**

## **Introduction**

**A**s 2014 came to a close, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) ended its then 13-year-old military operations in Afghanistan against the Taliban and al-Qaeda. The US-led international military coalition began its withdrawal on 28 December 2014, and although the US is maintaining some military presence in Afghanistan over the next few years, this residual force is a substantially reduced one.

The military campaign, named 'Global War on Terrorism' by NATO, cost the world over a trillion dollars and several thousand lives of civilians and soldiers. Needless to say, the extraordinary cost far exceeded the final outcome: al-Qaeda is far from decimated and several of its affiliates, like the Haqqani Network, remain a potent force in Afghanistan. In fact, al-Qaeda, against all odds, has survived despite severe attrition and fragmentation. A principal reason for its continuing operational presence is the emergence of new affiliates like al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQIP), al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria and Iraq.

In the Middle East, a series of events, beginning with the so-called 'Arab Spring' to the Western intervention in Syria to oust President Bashar al-Assad, has created a new set of terrorist groups, besides shoring up al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria and Iraq.

Perhaps the most dramatic, and dangerous, event has been the rise of an al-Qaeda breakaway group, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or the Islamic State. The ISIS, while challenging the hegemony of al-Qaeda, is at the same time strengthening the 'global *jihad*' movement which is also what al-Qaeda is aspiring to achieve.

There is no doubt that the foreign military drawdown from Afghanistan and the ISIS-al-Qaeda consolidation in the Middle East have bolstered the ranks of terrorists across the world. This has not only raised the level of conventional threats posed by existing terror groups but also unexpected attacks like that in Paris in January 2015.

That these events will help terrorist groups in the region to attract more recruits is a serious concern for South Asia, an epicentre of terrorism in many ways. Extremist organisations in the region, especially in Pakistan, are also acquiring greater expertise and stronger gumption to launch attacks of serious magnitude, such as the Mumbai attacks of November 2008, the June 2014 attack on the Karachi international airport, and the Peshawar attack of 16 December 2014.

The setting up of al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)—and the fact that an unknown number of people from South Asian countries have travelled to Syria and Iraq to fight alongside ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra—makes the possibility of a direct threat from these groups closer to reality.

It is in this context that this paper examines the prospects of al-Qaeda after the US drawdown in Afghanistan and the likely threats which the region, and India in particular, might face in the near future. Such an analysis will necessarily call for a supplementary scrutiny of ISIS and its possible expansion in the region.

## **Al-Qaeda in South Asia**

Al-Qaeda was born on the battlefield of the Afghan *Jihad* in the early 1980s. The history and place of its origins might provide valuable lessons in understanding the global terrorist group's future course of action. For instance, the fact that the 'Afghan *Jihad*' against the Soviet occupation, supported by Saudi Arabia, the US and several other countries, had brought extremists to Afghanistan from across the world and many of them who subsequently returned home, has served to expand al-Qaeda's ideology and war to distant lands.

For al-Qaeda, terror has been a key instrument in achieving its political objective of challenging the traditional global order. The group, through acts of terror, purports to challenge established states, invoke fear and capitulation, consolidate the Muslim *Ummah* and create a new model of governance, parallel to the existing Westphalian nation-state. These long-term goals had motivated the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood leader Abdullah Azzam to set up *Maktab-al-Khidmat* or the Afghan Services Bureau in 1984. Osama bin Laden was a junior functionary of the bureau, limited to fundraising. The bureau became the main centre for recruitment, training and financing of thousands of Afghanistan-bound young fighters, and was a precursor to al-Qaeda. The bureau created a network of training camps in Afghanistan, with its unique set of extremist ideology and battle-hardened *jibadi* commanders, and, as it turned out, became the alma mater of the future al-Qaeda's core leadership and senior cadre.<sup>1</sup>

It was when the *jihad* in Afghanistan had ended with the retreat of the Soviet forces in the late 1980s that bin Laden's role came to the fore when he supported his mentor Azzam in creating a global *jihad* movement which came to be known as al-Qaeda or the Base. The new group took

advantage of the infrastructure created to support and sustain the Afghan *Jihad*.<sup>2</sup> Though al-Qaeda became operational during bin Laden's stay in Sudan between 1991 and 1996, it emerged as a global terrorist outfit only after his return to Afghanistan in 1996. Azzam would eventually be killed in a mysterious car bombing in Peshawar in 1989. Azzam's death brought bin Laden closer to Ayman al-Zawahari and Gulbuddin Hekmatyr.

### *Jihadist Syndicate*

There were several reasons why bin Laden would choose Afghanistan as his base. The country provided an enabling environment for a group such as al-Qaeda to flourish. Bin Laden had been closely associated with *mujahideen* leaders like Jalaludin Haqqani<sup>3</sup> and Abdul Rassoul Sayyaf,<sup>4</sup> a friendship nurtured and strengthened in the battlefields of Afghanistan. It was with these associations that he would seek sanctuary and an operational base for al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. The civil war that engulfed Afghanistan with the Soviet exit also came in handy for al-Qaeda to consolidate its position without attracting a closer scrutiny from the international community.

The group was aided greatly by the presence of the Taliban. Bin Laden's return coincided with the Taliban securing a remarkable military victory in Kabul. The Taliban by then had established itself in Kabul with the help of the Pakistan Army. Although bin Laden's ties with the Taliban were strained, he was able to forge a tactical alliance with the Taliban amir Mullah Omar, partly facilitated by his monetary support to the Taliban movement. The Haqqani Network, in particular, helped a great deal in facilitating this bond.

These alliances, or the 'Jihadist Syndicate' as former US Defense Secretary Robert Gates called it, helped al-Qaeda to use Afghanistan as a base to

strengthen and expand its activities and networks. Training camps mushroomed in and around Jalalabad, Kunar, Khost, and other areas along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, run by different groups like Harkat-ul Jihad al Islami (HuJI) and Markaz-ud Dawa Wal Irshad (MDI), the parent body of Lashkar-e-Tayyeba (LeT). These camps hosted 'fighters' from the Gulf, Central and South Asia and the Xinjiang province of China.<sup>5</sup> Between 1996 and 11 September 2001, about 10,000-20,000 foreign 'fighters' received training at these camps in Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup>

One of the key bases of al-Qaeda's operations was near the Tora Bora Mountains from where bin Laden launched his jihad against the US and the West in August 1996. The first call of *jihad* came from bin Laden in his first *fatwa* against the US, 'A declaration of war against the Americans occupying the land of the two holy places', which listed the injustices meted out to the Muslim world by the US. His second 1998 *fatwa*, also issued from Afghanistan, called upon all Muslims to fulfill their duty to "kill the Americans and their allies".<sup>7</sup>

The first series of al-Qaeda attacks against the US began from their Afghanistan base two years after the *fatwa*: first on the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998; two years later against the aircraft carrier *USS Cole* in Yemen, and then the cataclysmic World Trade Center attack of 11 September 2001. The 9/11 attack killed over 4,000 and triggered an aggressive response from the US with an all-out military offensive against al-Qaeda and Taliban targets in Afghanistan.

### **Post-9/11 Survival**

The 'Global War on Terrorism', as the combined military offensive would come to be known—with over 170 countries, including Pakistan, joining the US—drove the Taliban and al-Qaeda out of Afghanistan, crippled al-



Qaeda's leadership and much of its global infrastructure. The group, however, managed to survive. In the midst of the war's sound and fury, almost unnoticed was al-Qaeda quietly dispersing into different directions as a survival strategy. The core leadership, under bin Laden and his Egyptian deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, took little time to re-organise itself across the Durand Line, reinforced linkages with local and regional militant groups, and used Pakistan as a base to expand to new areas.

Despite the 2009 US troops surge and a sustained drone campaign since then, the core al-Qaeda leadership remained safe until May 2011 when bin Laden was killed in a US Special Forces raid on the Pakistani garrison town, Abbottabad. The killing of bin Laden had raised hopes of an early al-Qaeda demise. About four years later, however, this widespread assumption has proved wrong. Not only has the al-Qaeda Core based in Pakistan survived the decade-long military and intelligence onslaught carried out by some of the most powerful armies of the world, it also has managed to expand to newer areas like Libya, Syria, Nigeria and Somalia.



*Source: Global Terrorism Database 2014, National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism*

Data relating to global terrorist incidents tell an even clearer story. For instance, in 2012, the six most lethal groups involved in the largest number of terrorist attacks in different parts of the world, killing over 5,000, were all related to al-Qaeda in some way. These groups included the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the Afghan Taliban, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) and the al-Nusra Front.

Besides the resilience of al-Qaeda, the figures, more importantly, underlined two other key aspects of the changing nature of terrorism in today's world.

- One, the most obvious perhaps, was the emergence of local al-Qaeda affiliates and the predominant threats these disparate groups pose to peace and stability in large parts of the world.
- The second was the deliberate stepping back of al-Qaeda Core as the principal fighting arm of the global *jihad* and transforming itself into a central hub connected to a growing variety of terrorist and militant groups in different parts of the world. The group was quick to adapt to the hostile global environment and reinvent itself from a hierarchical entity to a flat organisation, allowing autonomy of operations to its allies and associates, limiting its activities to ideological exhortations and commands. From a group which once spearheaded the global *jihadist* movement, al-Qaeda now seems content with being the 'brain trust' of the terrorist activities throughout the world. This could also be partly due to the fact that regional affiliates do not unquestioningly accept Zawahiri's leadership.

As a result, despite being a weakened force, al-Qaeda and its allied groups today possess the capability to influence groups and individuals to take up

arms against the state, to plan and execute targeted attacks in different parts of the world and thereby subvert global order. Media reports in April 2015 spoke about “hundreds of foreign fighters” affiliated with al-Qaeda and TTP moving from Waziristan to escape a Pakistan Army offensive and to bolster the ranks of the Afghan Taliban preparing for the first spring offensive post-drawdown.<sup>8</sup>

### *Post-9/11 Survival Strategy*

With the benefit of hindsight, it is not difficult to identify the reasons for al-Qaeda's survival. One was obviously the leadership. There is also the ability to adapt to changing circumstances, which essentially meant learning from failings and setbacks, consolidating forces, and reinventing itself. The heavy attrition in the leadership and structure forced al-Qaeda to transform from a hierarchical organisation to a flat module. It is difficult to discern whether such a transformation was conducted with deliberation or has simply been by default. There is enough indication from the translated trove of letters retrieved from bin Laden's Abbottabad hideout, that while the terrorist group was reconciled to its loss of men, material and sanctuary, it had not yet given up the fight altogether.

When al-Qaeda was targeted by the US-led military campaign in October 2001, the terrorist group first moved east, into 'safe areas' inside Pakistan, to escape and regroup. Many of them moved from Waziristan towards Khyber Agency (in the tribal areas), Sindh and Balochistan. This move was facilitated by extremist groups like LeJ and LeT, both of whom enjoyed a certain level of patronage from the state in Pakistan. Some groups went to Afghanistan, towards Nuristan which has been a base of operations for LeT since the Afghan *Jihad* era.

The group also went out of its way to start creating a network of associated groups and allies in different parts of the immediate neighbourhood of Afghanistan. The leaders planned to “instigate other groups” to share the responsibility of keeping the *jibadi* operations alive to tire out the enemy by creating different points of conflict. In this context, the leadership displayed greater accommodation of 'local' leaders who had a strong following and gave considerable operational autonomy. The al-Qaeda leadership insisted on choosing the targets.

There is evidence to suggest that the group, suffering leadership and resource attrition, was also busy crafting an alternative strategy to deal with the military campaign launched by the US and its allies. One move was to keep a close watch on key military and political news emanating from the West and its allied countries, including Pakistan. This was done at the local as well as at the central level to “extract new ideas and learn tactics and tricks of the enemy...to discover points of weakness”. The group also began exploring and promoting 'cheaper' ways of causing harm. For instance, extracting chlorate from salt, or changing the shape of materials to avoid capture in transit, and using easily available tools like gas cylinder and cars to carry out attacks. The cadres were asked to seek the help of criminal 'brothers' to procure weapons and related materials.

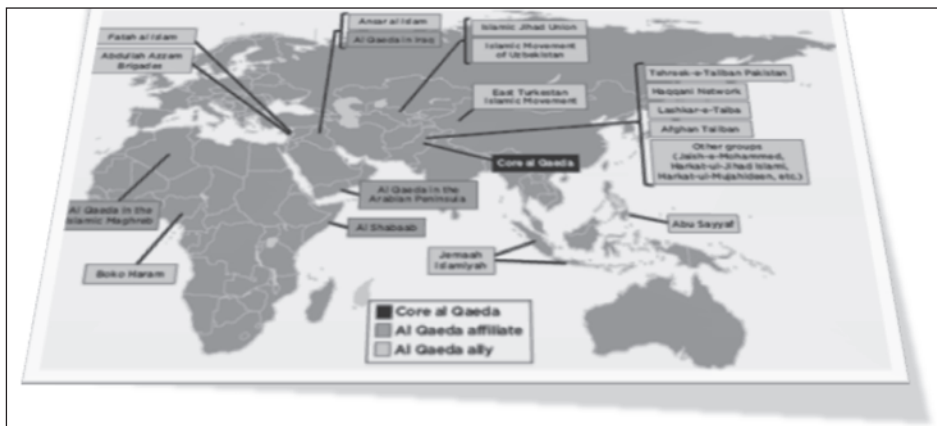
These moves also strengthened what lies at the heart of al-Qaeda's survival—the shield of secrecy. Despite being actively pursued by some of the most powerful intelligence and security agencies of the world since 2001, al-Qaeda's command and control, operational methods and outreach programmes remain no less obscure. Some of the terrorist leaders survived and avoided capture simply by staying off cell phones and radios and instead relying on couriers or face-to-face meetings. When they travelled to populated areas, they would stay among women and children which kept them relatively safe from the US bombings.

The group was extremely wary of 'spies', including those from within their ranks. Besides identifying and executing those who were even vaguely suspected to be spies, the group also decided to “reduce operations and activities and focus on persevering and survival” and focus on “defensive security” till the US withdrew their troops from Afghanistan. The operations were cut down to avoid “moving around...and be less exposed to the state”. The group also cut down its media presence, both offline and online, to become 'invisible'. This meant the group, for several years, focused more on counter espionage and keeping its footprints minimal by “hiding and decreasing [its] presence”.

### *Expansion in the Middle East and Africa*

Al-Qaeda adopted a similar strategy to expand its presence and influence to other parts of the world as well. When the US invaded Iraq in 2003, killing Saddam Hussein and triggering a bloody sectarian war, al-Qaeda sensed an opportunity to escape from its tightly squeezed corner in the tribal areas of Pakistan and seek new geographical territories. The sectarian conflict that engulfed Iraq gave birth to AQI and its brutal leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. It remained a potent force till Zarqawi's killing in 2009.<sup>10</sup> By then, there were other tumultuous events breaking out in the region, widely misunderstood at that time as the 'Arab Spring', which helped al-Qaeda to first find a toehold and then a bigger foothold in a region slipping rapidly into anarchy and violence. The US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, the turmoil in Libya, and the move by the West and its Arab allies to isolate and then target Syria allowed al-Qaeda to consolidate its footprint in the region. The most significant outcome of these events, however, was the emergence of the al-Qaeda splinter group, ISIS, which would soon prove itself more brutal and ambitious.

An important factor that helped al-Qaeda in the region was its ability to absorb or merge with other groups. As early as 2002, the group had exhibited the capability of co-opting local groups to extend their ideological sphere and reach. In fact, within two years of 9/11, al-Qaeda had absorbed or merged with 10 new and extant terrorist groups thereby establishing its presence in about 19 countries.<sup>11</sup> These included al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, which covers the Sahel and Sahara region in North Africa; AQAP, with its main base of operation in Yemen; al Shabaab in Somalia; and ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra Front, which have gradually spread their influence in Syria over the past few years.



Another strategy that al-Qaeda adopted to strengthen its hold in the Middle East was to find like-minded extremist groups and bring them under the 'tent' without exercising any direct control. In Africa and the Middle East, al-Qaeda offered this umbrella to groups like Boko Haram in Nigeria<sup>12</sup> and its splinter group, Jama'atu Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis Sudan (Vanguards for the Protection of Muslims in Black Africa) or Ansaru in short, Ansar al-Sharia Libya in Libya, Movement for Unity and *Jihad* in West Africa in Mali, and Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia in Tunisia. Bin Laden's desire to establish contacts with leaders of Boko Haram and

other groups in Africa was evident from documents seized from his Abbottabad hideout.<sup>13</sup>

This 'acquisition and merger' policy has been a potent instrument in al-Qaeda's arsenal which it can put to effective use to expand its sphere of influence in South Asia after the 2014 drawdown in Afghanistan.

### **Al-Qaeda's 'Pakistan Bureau'**

As this paper is concerned with the possibility of al-Qaeda's renewal in the Indian sub-continent, it will examine the terrorist group's consolidation and future trajectory in Pakistan, as well as the impact that events in the Middle East and Afghanistan can have on the group's immediate future.

Al-Qaeda's move into Pakistan was unquestionably compelled by the US military onslaught following the 9/11 attacks. But, as argued above, al-Qaeda's survival in the region post-9/11 was ensured more by the support it drew from its local affiliates and sympathisers. Many of the cadres, when they moved to the tribal areas of Pakistan from Afghanistan post-2001, married local women and established closer links with the tribal community. Al-Qaeda's past association with Punjab-based groups like the LeT, LeJ and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) also proved useful. Many of the Punjabi leaders had trained and participated in the Afghan *Jihad* and had close relationship with several *mujabideen* commanders who later joined al-Qaeda.

One of the groups that became a strong and reliable partner during their escape and regrouping was LeJ, a Sunni extremist group which has had a love-hate relationship with the establishment in Pakistan. The LeJ has had a long association with al-Qaeda and the Taliban from the Afghan *Jihad*

days. Ramzi Yusuf, who attacked the World Trade Center in New York in 1993, was close to LeJ and so was his uncle, Khaled Sheikh Mohammad, who planned the 9/11 attacks.<sup>14</sup> Akram Lahori, one of the co-founders of LeJ, and hanged by Pakistan in January 2015, reportedly acted as a front for al-Qaeda's operations in Pakistan.<sup>15</sup>

Most of the LeJ leadership had trained with the *mujabideen* during the jihad and on their return to Pakistan established closer links with JeM and LeT.<sup>16</sup> Some of them were even part of al-Qaeda's elite force, Brigade 055 which was renamed as Lashkar-al-Zil after 2002. In Pakistan, the LeJ enjoyed patronage from a vast network of mosques and *madrasas*. A large number of LeJ cadres had criminal background—they were involved in smuggling, carjacking and real estate deals—and could therefore exploit the criminal networks in the region to help al-Qaeda take shelter and regroup in Pakistan, especially in Balochistan and Punjab.

The earliest indication of this collaboration was evident within three months of the 9/11 attacks, when an American Jewish journalist, Daniel Pearl was killed by terrorists in Karachi in January 2002. Pearl's assassins came from JeM, the Taliban, LeJ and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) besides al-Qaeda. Subsequent terrorist attacks and incidents show LeJ becoming al-Qaeda's 'strike force' in Pakistan from 2002 onwards.

A relationship which has received less attention than it deserves is that of al-Qaeda and Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), a major religious political party with an ambitious agenda of establishing Muslim superiority.<sup>17</sup> The party is headquartered in Manshoora, near Lahore and has branches across the world. The JI's Indian unit-JI (Hind), the original party, and the Bangladesh branch are equally influential. Many writers consider JI to be an alma mater of all *jibadi* groups in South Asia as several leaders and



cadres of almost all the groups active in the region<sup>18</sup> have had some association with the party at some point.<sup>19</sup>

Though there are various accounts of the relationship between al-Qaeda<sup>20</sup> and JI, it is difficult to pin down the exact nature, and extent, of this relationship. During the Afghan Jihad, recruits from Palestine, Bangladesh, Thailand, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, the Philippines and Africa came first to the safehouses run by the JI before being taken to the training camps of Khost and Khaldan in Afghanistan, run by Hekmatyr's Hizb-e-Islami.<sup>21</sup> The Hekmatyr-JI link is well-documented.<sup>22</sup>

Although the party, once considered close to the Pakistan Army, has denied publicly espousing the al-Qaeda cause, its links with the terrorist group surfaced after 9/11, with many senior al-Qaeda leaders, including Khalid Mohammad Sheikh, being arrested from the houses of JI leaders.<sup>23</sup> What is relevant for this paper is the JI's past association with terrorism, particularly against India in Kashmir. It was JI's student and youth outfits—al Badr and al Faran, being the most notorious—which were used by the Pakistan Army to launch the so-called Kashmir Jihad in the late 1980s.<sup>24</sup> Thus the possibility of the JI cadres, along with other similar groups, coming together to target India under the al-Qaeda umbrella, cannot be dismissed.

The LeT, on the other hand, played a more devious game by pretending to stay away from al-Qaeda. But its origins during the Afghan *Jihad* and the support it drew from various al-Qaeda leaders, including bin Laden—he once spoke over the phone at the LeT's annual convention in Muridke and his recordings were played at every convention—raises doubts about this projected detachment.<sup>25</sup> What strengthens this suspicion is the fact that a few al-Qaeda leaders had taken shelter in LeT safehouses from where they were arrested.

More recent events project a far more complex relationship. In the last few years, the US-led forces in Afghanistan have found LeT 'fighters' alongside the Taliban in several provinces.<sup>26</sup> The US military officials believe that these men were part of a breakaway group of LeT or 'renegades' who fell out with the LeT leadership over not joining the global jihad campaign and working as a proxy for the US ally, the Pakistan Army. It is believed that this splinter group comprised members of the Tehreek-ul Mujahideen and Kairun Nass—the group set up by Zakiur Rahman Lakhvi in 2002 to counter Hafiz Saeed. This group has been fighting the US forces in Afghanistan and could turn to India after the US drawdown. Many of its leaders have possibly been co-opted into the AQIS. This LeT-al Qaeda tie multiplies the threat to India.<sup>27</sup>

Equally worrisome has been al-Qaeda's post-9/11 induction of Pakistani nationals and members of Punjab-based groups within its fold. The al-Qaeda opened up leadership positions, reserved once for Arabs, to Pakistanis. The al-Qaeda's chief of operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Abu Mustafa al-Yazid, better known as Shaykh 'Isa al-Masri (killed in a drone attack in May 2010), established the “Pakistan bureau” by tying up with local groups like LeJ, HuJI, and Ilyas Kashmiri's 313 Brigade. Besides Kashmiri,<sup>28</sup> other prominent terrorist leaders who joined the group were Badr Mansoor,<sup>29</sup> Ustad Farooq,<sup>30</sup> Farman al-Shinwari<sup>31</sup> and Ustad Asim Umar.<sup>32</sup> By co-opting these men, associated with different extremist and terrorist groups in Pakistan, al-Qaeda managed to kickstart its operations in Pakistan remarkably well after the loss of its base in Afghanistan. Many of them were from south Punjab and had previous association with Afghan *mujahideen* groups like al Badr and Hizb-e-Islami.

These groups, incensed also by the Pakistan Army's military offensive against them in Swat and other areas in 2008-2009, carried out some

significant attacks inside Pakistan, the most dramatic being the one on GHQ in Rawalpindi in October 2009. The attack was led by Dr Usman (since executed), a former Army Medical Corps soldier from Kahuta in Punjab who joined LeJ after his retirement and then JeM before joining TTP and al-Qaeda's commander Ilyas Kashmiri. His short profile revealed two significant developments: the fusion of terror networks in Pakistan and how al-Qaeda was consolidating and expanding its influence over the region, especially in Pakistan.

By 2005, there were enough indicators that al-Qaeda Core, though substantially depleted, was operating from its new sanctuary in the tribal areas of Pakistan.<sup>33</sup> Most of the al-Qaeda-related plots after 2004, including the July 7 attacks in London, could be traced to FATA. Not only was this sanctuary easily accessible to potential recruits,<sup>34</sup> it also had the indirect protection from ISI which was busy recruiting men in Quetta and other locations for the Taliban offensive.<sup>35</sup>

### *State Patronage and Blowback*

The level of patronage and protection enjoyed in Pakistan by various al-Qaeda associates and other terrorist groups, similar in many ways to the situation that existed in Afghanistan during the 1990s, also enabled the group to survive the combined might of several armed forces. The continuing state patronage, in varying shades, of groups like LeT, Haqqani Network and JeM could be measured easily by their substantial growth in influence and capability in the past few years despite the 'Global War on Terrorism' raging in their backyard. The state's increased use of these groups to target India and Afghanistan in particular, and even to quell or counter domestic rebellion and terrorism, have not only emboldened these groups but also deepened their kinship of patronage.

This state support meant greater accommodation of extremist ideologies, a cultivated or natural public sympathy for these groups and, more important, an abiding ambiguity within the state agencies about dealing with such terrorist and extremist groups.

This is aptly borne out by the recent disclosures<sup>36</sup> that there were military officers who knew about bin Laden's presence at Abbottabad. This soft-peddalling of al-Qaeda by Pakistan was certainly one of the reasons for the group's survival in the region. The Pakistan military may have also assisted—albeit, inadvertently—some of the al-Qaeda leaders to escape the American and Northern Alliance offensive after the 9/11 attacks. In November 2001, in an effort to rescue Pakistani military officials trapped in Kunduz province in northern Afghanistan and who were fighting alongside the Taliban, the Pakistan military planned an airlift. In the process, an unknown number of Taliban and al-Qaeda leaders also managed to flee the country and enter the north-western parts of Pakistan.<sup>37</sup> Sustained US pressure from 2002 onwards, disrupted the cosy relationship between Pakistan and al-Qaeda. Even then, Pakistan was able to keep the balance between the groups which targeted India and those who targeted the foreign forces in Afghanistan.

It was the Lal Masjid operations of July 2007 which dramatically altered the game against Pakistan. There was also considerable resentment within terrorist groups considered 'friendly' because Gen. Pervez Musharraf, under pressure from the US, had asked them to hold back their Kashmir campaign. This brewing resentment and the Lal Masjid operation, in which several Pashtun students, both boys and girls, were killed, turned several groups against the state. Soon after, hundreds of recruits from Punjab—one estimate puts it at 5,000<sup>38</sup>—began flooding the training camps run by the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Waziristan and other nearby areas.

In a short span of two years post-Lal Masjid, knowledgeable analysts in Pakistan had warned that Punjab was turning into a “factory where suicide bombers are produced...Punjab has become a major recruiting ground and hub for the planning of terrorist attacks, and it's a human resource for the fighting in Afghanistan”.<sup>39</sup>

By July 2010, al-Qaeda made public its plans for Pakistan. “We are trying to create and to liberate a Pakistan that will be a pure Shari'a governed state and that will be a safe centre for all Muslims from any place in the world, irrespective of their color, race or geographical origin,” said Ustad Ahmad Farooq main spokesperson for al-Qaeda's Pakistan branch, in an interview to al-Qaeda's media wing, As Sahab Media Productions.<sup>40</sup> “We are doing *jihad* for a Pakistan that will be a centre of the *mujabideen* and of Muslims who would be able to come to Pakistan without any restrictions”, the statement said.

**Table: Terrorist fatalities in Pakistan-2003-2010<sup>41</sup>**

YEAR	CASUALTIES
2003	189
2004	863
2005	648
2006	1471
2007	3598
2008	6715
2009	11704
2010	7435

*Source: Table drawn from data available at South Asia Terrorism Portal-www.satp.org*

The same year, the Pakistani state, facing an unprecedented spike in terrorist attacks, sought out al-Qaeda and the TTP for a compromise. The number of terrorist attacks inside Pakistan, and the casualties including that of security personnel, had mounted dramatically, with 2009 being the most disastrous year. Of the 11,704 persons killed, 991 were security personnel, from the army as well as the para-military force, Frontier Corps.

### *Al-Qaeda and TTP*

The TTP's relationship with al-Qaeda is difficult to fathom principally because the evidence of collaboration is largely anecdotal. What is clear is that the two have had a problematic relationship; it is the nature and the depth of the relationship which remains less understood. For example, when Pakistan had approached Nek Mohammad in 2004 with the offer of immunity and huge amounts of cash for evicting foreign terrorists from the tribal areas, the tribal leader, who later went on to become the TTP chief, agreed first and then went back on his words within few days of the Shakai agreement.<sup>42</sup> This indicated some sort of understanding, if not a formal pact, between tribal communities and al-Qaeda seeking shelter in the tribal areas. There have been other agreements—a few of them between March and May 2009 when TTP's attacks were at its peak—but all met with the same fate as the Shakai agreement.

There were some tangible benefits for both the groups from this partnership. Al-Qaeda drew upon the recruitment, training and support networks of the smaller but influential local groups, including TTP.<sup>43</sup> The local groups benefited from al-Qaeda's vast experience in confronting conventional military forces, dodging drone attacks and, most important of all, elements of cyber *jihad*. Al-Qaeda, in essence, acted as a 'force multiplier' for local groups like TTP.<sup>44</sup> Al-Qaeda also helped these groups financially.

This coalition helped al-Qaeda to keep a low profile, and concentrate on shoring up its newfound sanctuary in the areas straddling Durand Line with the help of the Haqqani Network.<sup>45</sup> Till recently, al-Qaeda had maintained a covert presence in Pakistan while promoting TTP and other allied groups to carry out frontal attacks on the state of Pakistan,

provoking the military to get embroiled in a protracted and debilitating war in the tribal areas. This could be changing as indicated by al-Qaeda's move in 2012 to appoint a TTP commander, Farman al-Shinwari, as the head of its Pakistan chapter. This was followed up by the setting up of AQIS under the command of another TTP ideologue, Ustad Asim Umar, in 2014. Both Shinwari and Umar are former members of HuJI, a transnational terrorist group with deep linkages to al-Qaeda and with presence in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh.

### **Ties with the Afghan Taliban**

Before examining al-Qaeda's most critical relationship with the Haqqani Network, it will be instructive to study the group's tenuous equation with the Afghan Taliban. The reason is straightforward: without the Taliban, it would have been difficult, if not impossible, for al-Qaeda to find a foothold in the region. Both groups were initially suspicious of each other. Mullah Omar thought bin Laden had some association with the US while the latter suspected Omar to be close to the Pakistan Army.<sup>46</sup>

The Taliban was already a force to reckon with in Afghanistan when bin Laden moved to Afghanistan in 1996. But the fact that he could only find shelter in Jalalabad and not Kandahar or Kabul showed the extent of suspicion between the two groups. Both groups, however, were able to enter into a tactical alliance of convenience. Bin Laden declared that he accepted the leadership of Omar. In return, Omar offered him protection. In an interview, Omar said he would not give up bin Laden. “No. We cannot do that. If we did, it means we are not Muslims... that Islam is finished. If we were afraid of attack, we could have surrendered him the last time we were threatened and attacked. So America can hit us again, and this time we don't even have a friend”, he claimed.<sup>47</sup>

Documents seized by the US forces from Abbottabad after the killing of bin Laden reveal regular correspondence between bin Laden, Zawahiri and Omar. The letters suggested an “ideological convergence” between the two groups and referred to “joint operations against NATO forces in Afghanistan, the Afghan government and targets in Pakistan”.<sup>48</sup> Long years of fighting a common enemy “in a common trench, given blood to each other” made the bonds much stronger.<sup>49</sup> Upon the death of bin Laden, the Taliban declared that “the Afghans will not forget the sacrifices and struggle of Sheik Osama, this great patron of Islam”.<sup>50</sup>

At the same time, it cannot be denied that the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent US reprisals that led to the overthrow of the Taliban raised doubts in the minds of the Taliban leadership about their relationship with al-Qaeda.<sup>51</sup> Detained Taliban cadres have told their interrogators that senior Taliban leadership considered al-Qaeda as a 'handicap'.<sup>52</sup> This was confirmed in the leaked 2012 NATO report, which stated that in “most regions of Afghanistan, Taliban leaders have no interest in associating with al-Qaeda. Working with al-Qaeda invites targeting, and al-Qaeda personnel are no longer the adept and versatile fighters and commanders they once were”.<sup>53</sup>

The Taliban, given the necessity of maintaining a unified front against the Afghan and international security forces, has not publicly denounced al-Qaeda, though it has made implicit attempts to distance itself from the organisation.<sup>54</sup> It has never posted congratulatory messages in response to the actions of global *jihadist* groups<sup>55</sup> and Mullah Omar has repeatedly issued statements claiming that the “Islamic Republic” wants to maintain good and positive relations with all its neighbours and the international community.<sup>56</sup> The existing evidence paints an image of a relationship that



continues to remain a necessity for both groups, but appears to remain strained and shrouded in uncertainty at the same time.

### *The Haqqani Bulwark*

It is the Haqqani Network which has been a far more effective partner for al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. The Network, which also bankrolls and arms the Afghan Taliban, has its own equation with al-Qaeda.<sup>57</sup> The founder of the Network, Jalaluddin Haqqani, has been a fervent supporter of global *jihad* since the 1980s and, consequently, shares a great degree of ideological affinity with al-Qaeda as compared to the Mullah Omar-led Quetta Shura. Even in the 1990s, it was al-Qaeda's ties with the Haqqani Network that allowed it to circumvent some of the restrictions imposed on it by Mullah Omar. For instance, though the Taliban was wary of taking on the might of the US, the Network colluded with al-Qaeda and others to issue the *fatwas* in 1996. After the Taliban began distancing itself from al-Qaeda—following the group's attacks against US missions in Africa—fearing a reprisal from the US, it was the Network that facilitated bin Laden and his men to establish their base in the Tora Bora mountains in eastern Afghanistan. The Haqqanis have also acted as mediators between the Taliban and al-Qaeda, negotiating on behalf of the latter for shelter and support.

The depth of the Haqqani-al-Qaeda relationship could also be measured by a simple yardstick: they share the same geographic space, much of it along the Durand Line. The 9/11 Commission Report had clearly indicated that most of al-Qaeda's bases in Afghanistan in the 1990s were located in areas controlled by the Haqqani Network. This has remained consistent even post-2001 as the main operating base for al-Qaeda in Afghanistan lies in the traditional strongholds of the Haqqani Network—Paktia, Paktika, Khost—and coincide with its area of operation as well

such as provinces of Kunar, Nuristan, Kabul, Zabul, Wardak, Logar and Ghazni.

The Network has remained loyal to al-Qaeda, protecting it even from the Pakistan Army after the September 11 attacks. It was a big gamble for the Network which has enjoyed, and continues to enjoy, what is perhaps the most strategic patronage of the Pakistan Army.

The US officials have also described the Haqqani Network as the biggest enabler of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, providing its fighters with access to operational infrastructure in eastern Afghanistan and North Waziristan. A US military study in July 2011 found that the Network had not only found al-Qaeda members a safe haven but also supported the group with “training, propaganda support, networking opportunities and other resources”. The study concluded that the Network “has been more important to the development and sustainment of al-Qaeda and the global *jihad* than any other single actor or group”.

### **Looking Beyond 2014**

After identifying some of the reasons why, and how, al-Qaeda managed to survive and expand its control and influence against all known odds, it would be useful now to examine al-Qaeda's strategy vis-à-vis South Asia following the US drawdown in Afghanistan.

### ***Pakistan***

Considering the fluid nature of developments in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, it would be premature to make any definitive assessment. It is not difficult to see, however, that even though al-Qaeda's presence and operating base in the tribal areas of Pakistan has waned in recent years, it is

not likely to vacate the Af-Pak region in the near future. In fact, groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS, and various neo-converts could raise the level of violence in the region—against the state and against each other—in order to claim primacy. The Karachi bus attack of 14 May 2015, in which members of the Ismaeli community were targeted, is an indicator of such an eventuality.

Similarly, there is no sign of terrorist groups ceding ground to the state forces. More importantly, the Pakistan Army has shown no inclination either to sever its patronage of many of the terrorist groups whose allegiance to al-Qaeda may not be implicit but cannot be entirely wished away. Though Operation Zarb-e-Azb has affected the terrorist infrastructure in the tribal areas, al-Qaeda and its affiliates continue to remain a potent threat for Pakistan.

Pakistan continues to see some of these groups as strategic assets that can be used to further its interests in both Afghanistan and India. For instance, Pakistan's reluctance to go after groups like the Haqqani Network is evident during the latest series of military operations launched in Pakistan's tribal areas beginning in June 2014.<sup>58</sup> There are, however, reports suggesting that the Haqqani Network may have also been affected by the Pakistan Army's recent military actions in the tribal areas.

It is true that the Pakistan Army has been making efforts to contain the threat of terrorist violence. Prolonged military operations have been targeting select terrorist groups since 2002. Such offensives have become even sharper since the emergence of TTP in December 2007. The December 2014 Peshawar attack witnessed an unprecedented outrage in the country against terrorism. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif declared that there should be no distinction between 'good' and 'bad' Taliban. The Army chief, Gen. Raheel Sharif, vowed that there would be no let-up in

military action until terrorist groups responsible for the massacre were punished.

There has been some consistency in the General's statements. In November 2014, he said that no distinction is being made between the "Haqqani Network, TTP or any other group" and that the military offensive "is not restricted to Waziristan and Khyber tribal areas but covers the whole country".<sup>59</sup> He repeated similar assurances during his trip to the US in November 2014. In fact, Gen. Sharif's predecessor, Gen. Ashfaq Kayani in his address to the nation on Pakistan's Independence Day in August 2012, had also pinpointed the insurgency in the country's tribal belt as the gravest national security threat.

The problem is not in the rhetoric after the tragic Peshawar school attack, but rather in what gets done on the ground. There is no doubt that a strong military action was initiated in the tribal areas but it was, like in the past, selective. The 'cherry-picking' strategy is what has landed Pakistan into the ruinous situation confronting it today. There is no indication that any valuable lessons have been learnt from past follies. A few weeks before the Peshawar attack, Sartaz Aziz, the National Security Advisor to the Prime Minister, had claimed that his country made a clear distinction between terrorist groups who were not harming Pakistan and those who did. This was in sharp contrast to what the Army chief had reiterated on various occasions.

This double-speak underlines an abiding character of Pakistan's strategic thinking: aim short, give it all, and leave others to worry about the long-term consequences. This characteristic was most evident in its 'war against terror', patronising a friendly group of terrorists while targeting a select few. It was not an error of judgment, as widely believed; rather it was a carefully calculated strategy. This benefited groups like LeT and the

Haqqani Network, and also al-Qaeda and its allies like the TTP. The diminished presence of international forces in Afghanistan is also likely to mean less military and intelligence action against al-Qaeda, giving the group the much needed breathing space and time to regroup and reorganise itself in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The US drone campaign, carried out from bases in Afghanistan, has been a highly effective strategy in killing some of the top leaders of al-Qaeda and its allies, like Nek Muhammad, Ilyas Kashmiri, Baitullah Mehsud, Mullah Nazir and Hakimullah Mehsud.<sup>60</sup> As the US military presence and operations in the region decline, the drone campaign would become much tougher to execute. The US has already scaled down its drone programme, which had increased sharply since Barack Obama assumed the presidency in 2009. Although as per the terms of the new US-Afghanistan security pact, the drone campaigns could continue up to 2017, these would be fewer in number and intensity. Bruce Riedel, a former CIA officer who has advised successive US Presidents on al-Qaeda, has argued that once the danger of drone campaigns comes down, al-Qaeda's allies like the TTP and LeT would be more than willing to help the organisation to recover in the region.<sup>61</sup>

### *Back in Afghanistan*

Besides Pakistan, al-Qaeda can exploit the US drawdown to revive its Afghanistan base with the help of the Haqqani Network and other associate groups. US officials have warned that a complete withdrawal of US troops from the region could provide al-Qaeda “with space within which to plan and conduct operations against the West”.<sup>62</sup>

Media reports indicate that al-Qaeda was, like in Pakistan, cementing local ties and bringing in small numbers of experienced militants to train a new

generation of fighters as a means of laying the groundwork for reviving the organisation's fortunes in Afghanistan, post-2014.<sup>63</sup> Al-Qaeda is present in some measure in Kunar and Nuristan provinces. The Haqqani Network's domination of Loya Paktia and Miranshah (South Waziristan) has also helped al-Qaeda to anchor itself in the area. Another overlooked factor has been al-Qaeda's social network in the area. For instance, Zawahiri is married to a Mohmand Pashtun woman who lives with her children on the border of Bajaur and Mohmand. The Mohmand Pashtuns are the largest tribes in Mohmand Agency (Pakistan) and Kunar province in Afghanistan.

Afghan officials also maintain that al-Qaeda, despite suffering heavy losses, retains sufficient capability to regenerate inside Afghanistan as the US influence in the country wanes. The police chief of Paktika province had noted back in 2012 that al-Qaeda was moving more weapons into Afghanistan from their bases in Pakistan in an attempt to “increase their number and take advantage of the Americans leaving”.<sup>64</sup> There is concern, in Afghanistan and elsewhere, that the resurgence of the Taliban in east and south Afghanistan could once again provide a haven to al-Qaeda and its affiliates akin to events of the 1990s.<sup>65</sup>

Still, it remains to be seen how far this apprehension would hold true in the future. As argued earlier, the Taliban remains wary of openly associating itself with al-Qaeda. A resurgence of al-Qaeda, as such, in areas under the Omar-led Taliban faction is far from given—something validated by the current reach of al-Qaeda's presence in Afghanistan. The US drawdown from the region may, in fact, remove the basis of their alliance.

There are two factors, however, that could keep the Taliban and al-Qaeda together, at least in the first few years after the US withdrawal from

Afghanistan. One is the common patronage enjoyed by both groups from the Haqqanis, and second is the steady inroad being made by ISIS into their ranks and areas of influence. The setting up of the ISIS Khorasan group, covering Afghanistan and Pakistan besides India and beyond, presents a challenge to both al-Qaeda and the Taliban. The ISIS chief, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's self-anointment as a Caliph is a direct challenge to the Taliban leader Mullah Omar considered, until recently, to be the *ameer-ul-momineen*, or leader of the faithful.

At this stage, it is also difficult to determine how the Taliban movement will unfold in the future. A great deal will depend on the internal transition within the movement, as well as the manner in which the differences amongst the various factions pan out. There is no guarantee that the so-called moderates, who have shown willingness to engage with the international community, would be the dominant force within the Quetta Shura, post-2014. In the 1990s as well the moderate faction, which was pushing for limiting ties with bin Laden and for greater engagement with the international community, was ultimately sidelined.<sup>66</sup>

There has also been speculation about the extent of control that Mullah Omar has over his foot soldiers. A number of younger-generation Taliban fighters are also proving to be more susceptible to the influence of foreign militants over the past decade, and harbour far-reaching ambitions of creating an Islamic Emirate that span the Muslim world, consistent with the visions of al-Qaeda.<sup>67</sup> These men could also veer towards ISIS, a tendency that has indeed already started. Rauf Khadem, a former Taliban field commander, was appointed Deputy Governor of Khorasan in January 2015. Within two weeks of his appointment, he was killed in a drone strike. Khadem had close links with Arab *Jihadists* and funding networks in the Persian Gulf, and had embraced Salafism leading to a fallout with the Taliban leadership. Similarly, there are a number of

other former Afghan militants who have also declared their allegiance to the ISIS.<sup>68</sup>

Despite these uncertainties, the possibility of al-Qaeda consolidating its position in eastern Afghanistan and the Haqqani strongholds remains high. The US Special Operations Command Chief Admiral Bill McRaven had warned the US House Armed Services Committee in February 2014 about such a possibility. He said that although the group's core “has gotten markedly weaker”, the threat “was metastasising”.<sup>69</sup> Former CIA chief, Robert Gates was more forthcoming in his assessment.<sup>70</sup> He believed that as the ISIS gained ground in Syria and Iraq, al-Qaeda and its allies could do the same in Afghanistan in the near future. Zawahiri's repeated *bayat* (vow of allegiance) to Mullah Omar was not only a direct challenge to ISIS chief Baghdadi but also a calculated move to seek a closer alliance with the Taliban. As Gates said<sup>71</sup> while the ISIS was making all the mistakes which the al-Qaeda committed in its heyday—brilliant tactics but no strategic vision—it was al-Qaeda which was quietly consolidating its image and strength in South Asia.

### *Rise of ISIS in South Asia*

Al-Qaeda, however, may have to compete with ISIS in South Asia as the latter has sought to make inroads into the Afghanistan-Pakistan region since the latter half of 2014. As early as September 2014, ISIS leaflets were posted throughout Peshawar proclaiming the intentions of the group to spread its influence throughout Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>72</sup> Since then there have been numerous reports of the group slowly spreading its influence in the region. Videos have emerged of the ISIS recruiting local militants and a number of individual commanders and different factions of militant groups—the Afghan Taliban, TTP and IMU—have pledged their allegiance to Baghdadi.<sup>73</sup> For instance, since



October 2014, a number of mid- and low-level TTP commanders have joined the ISIS along with TTP amirs for Bajaur, Kurram, Orakzai, Khyber, Peshawar and Hangu.

As mentioned earlier, a number of Afghan militants, including former Taliban commanders, have also defected to the ISIS. Numerous Afghan provinces such as Farah, Sar-e-Pul, Nangarhar, Helmand, Jawzjan, Kunduz, Ghazni, Paktika and Zabul have also reportedly witnessed ISIS presence.<sup>74</sup> ISIS, in declaring its presence in the 'Khorasan' province in January 2015, has caused much concern in the region. In fact, the Afghan Taliban is also reportedly worried about the impact that ISIS may have on the younger, and more radical, Taliban fighters.<sup>75</sup> A worried Afghan Taliban had to hastily publish a detailed biography of Mullah Omar to counter the ISIS propaganda.<sup>76</sup> In June 2015, the Taliban also issued an open letter, on its website, warning the ISIS to not undertake any action that could provoke them. The letter also claimed that jihad carried out only under their name in Afghanistan would be acceptable.<sup>77</sup>

Despite this increased reportage about ISIS in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the actual extent of the group's presence in the region is far from certain. There is even confusion about ISIS' role in the recent Jalalabad attack in April 2015, which it claimed as its first attack in South Asia. Many believe it to have been carried out either by the Afghan insurgent groups or by Pakistani groups at the behest of the ISI.

A number of factors have been highlighted as being responsible for limiting ISIS' presence in the region. Neither is its adherence to the stricter Salafi interpretation of Islam nor is its vision of a global jihad likely to find much following in the region. The Taliban subscribes to the Deobandi school of thought and, at least, the Quetta Shura of the Afghan Taliban has a more nationalist outlook, which does not extend beyond

Afghanistan's borders. This may prevent the group from being able to recruit a large number of followers.<sup>78</sup> A number of clashes between alleged ISIS militants and the Taliban in Afghanistan, especially in the southern provinces, also show the opposition even among the Afghan insurgents to this group's expansion.

It should be noted that such differences had not prevented al-Qaeda from forging a tactical alliance with the Afghan Taliban in the 1990s. Bin Laden and al-Qaeda's acceptance of Omar as their supreme leader had played a significant role in paving the way for this arrangement. Baghdadi, on the other hand, has shown no signs of accepting any other leader. Baghdadi has made statements about the Afghan Taliban leadership which are insulting in nature. Thus it is unlikely that the ISIS would be able to develop a working relationship with Mullah Omar in the way al-Qaeda has developed.

Such limitations should not, however, overlook the threat posed by ISIS. While a new foreign militant group may not have emerged in the region as yet—akin to al-Qaeda—it does provide an alternative to disgruntled and disenfranchised militants, who may not agree with the vision of their leadership. The main recruits for ISIS in Afghanistan have been those very militants, who have fallen out with the senior Taliban commanders. Similarly, the ISIS has managed to recruit former TTP militants in Pakistan as well. This could complicate efforts of governments in both Afghanistan and Pakistan to reach any sort of settlement with the Afghan Taliban and the TTP, respectively.

More worryingly, such affiliations could also provide a base for ISIS to spread its presence in the future, whether actual or apparent. Just as al-Qaeda has managed to spread its influence in other parts of the world by building alliances and co-opting local militants and groups, individual

commanders and splinter factions in Afghanistan and Pakistan swearing allegiance to ISIS could also be a pointer to a similar pattern.

### *Middle East Turmoil*

Finally, the growing instability in the Middle East and North Africa—and the emergence of terrorist groups like Jabhat al-Nusra Front and Boko Haram with a pan-Islamic agenda—have emboldened the rank and file of terrorist outfits in South Asia, especially in Pakistan. In recent years, Pakistani terrorists are increasingly moving beyond the 'AfPak' theatre and going global.

This is not a new phenomenon; there have been earlier such *jibadi* migrations from Pakistan. For instance, Pakistani groups were quite active in the Balkans and Central Asia, besides Afghanistan and Kashmir. HuJI, the alma mater of many of today's top terrorist leaders active in the region, was reported to have dispatched a large contingent to fight in the Bosnian civil war of 1992-95. Many of those who returned home became leaders of new *jibadi* groups in Pakistan. Syed Omar Sheikh of JeM was one such case. Many LeT leaders were also part of the Bosnia 'campaign'.

The recent movements of terrorists from Pakistan to North Africa and Middle East are thus of relevance in understanding the possible future trajectory of al-Qaeda and ISIS. In 2012, Pakistani cadres were found in Mali when the North African state was under threat from al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and its local ally, Ansar al-Din. Reports quoting security officials indicated the presence of Pakistani trainers in Mali's capital, Timbuktu. They were brought in to train new recruits in “guerrilla warfare, use of various types of weapons, arms smuggling and in laundering money collected from ransoms”.<sup>79</sup> It is difficult to know, in the absence of any credible reports on the Mali conflict, why Pakistani

trainers would go to Mali and if they did visit the conflict zone, what their role would have been.

In 2013, when a civil war broke out in Syria, triggered by external forces, Pakistani terrorists were quick to set up a training hub there, sending 'experts' in warfare and information technology.<sup>80</sup> Media reports in July 2014 talked about some 200 Pakistanis fighting alongside ISIS. It is not known, however, how many Pakistanis were fighting with Jabhat al-Nusra Front against ISIS and the Syrian armed forces.<sup>81</sup>

The rise of Baghdadi and ISIS, especially in South Asia, could also be a proverbial flash-in-the-pan, lacking any long-term impact on terrorist groups active in Afghanistan and Pakistan. But these developments reveal certain trends which are significant to our understanding of the threats posed by al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups in the near future. The new *jibadi* battlefield in Syria and Iraq has given fresh recruits an opportunity to learn new tricks of the trade, test their skills in a real battle with conventional forces, and tap into a growing network of like-minded groups and individuals from different parts of the world.

In short, the extremists of today are more skilled, battle-hardened and closely networked than their fellow cadres were, before 2001. Their return to Pakistan, Bangladesh and India could trigger a fresh wave of terrorism in the region, and help al-Qaeda and its offshoots to strengthen their hold in the region.

### **Implications for India**

Terrorist threats to India have consistently remained high since the end of the Afghan Jihad and emergence of Pakistan-supported terrorist groups like LeT, Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM) and JeM. Although much of the

threat was directed at Kashmir, there has been a significant expansion of the threat to the mainland after 2001. Of all the terrorist attacks in India, including in Kashmir, a majority were carried out by groups operating out of Pakistan—and with links to al Qaeda—and in later years by groups like Indian Mujahideen (IM) and Hizb-ul Mujahideen. The Taliban and al-Qaeda have not carried out any direct attack on India but their presence in the neighbourhood remains a subject of grave concern since both have stated their intent to attack India in the past as well as recent times.

These developments mean that parts of the region become extremely vulnerable to instability and violence, impeding India's efforts at ensuring a stable neighbourhood for greater regional integration. It could create newer threats to the country, compelling India to invest in expanding and deepening its security architecture at a heavy cost to its exchequer.

Early signs of a terrorist upsurge are already visible. Significant pointers have been the recent re-surfacing in Pakistan of Masood Azhar, leader of JeM, and Mast Gul, leader of Al Umar Mujahideen. The LeT's phenomenal growth after the Mumbai attacks of November 2008 has magnified an existing threat. Al-Qaeda's Pakistan chapter has been calling Indians to take up *jihad*. The TTP leaders, on various occasions, have sought the revival of *jihad* in Kashmir. So have Azhar and Hafiz Saeed.

Incidentally, Mast Gul, a Pashtun from Kurram agency, had appeared alongside TTP's Peshawar Chief in early 2014. In 1995, Gul was sent by ISI to strengthen militant networks in Kashmir. He later joined Al Umar Mujahideen, a local militant outfit led by Mushtaq Ahmad Zargar. Zargar was one of the three terrorist leaders who were released by India in exchange for the passengers of Indian Airlines Flight IC814 in 1999. Zargar has since then revived Al Umar Mujahideen in Muzaffarabad, PoK and has aligned with Syed Salahuddin's United Jihad Council.

In the last decade or so, there have been concerted efforts to recruit a large number of foreigners to train at camps run by LeT and JeM in Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and the tribal areas. There have been reports of several Indians being part of these training camps. Gul's TTP avatar could mean an alignment between the tribal group and the Kashmiri groups.

This fits in with reports of Kashmiri cadres fighting alongside the Taliban against the US forces. They claim to be part of Ansar-ut Tawhid fi Bilad al-Hind (Supporters of Monotheism in the Land of India), reportedly a splinter group of IM which is aligned with al-Qaeda. Some of the top IM leaders, notably the Karachi-based chief Riyaz Shahbandri—better known by his place of birth, Bhatkal in Karnataka—and Muhammad Ahmad Siddibapa (Yasin Bhatkal), have admitted seeking al-Qaeda patronage and meeting leaders of the global terrorist group.<sup>82</sup> India's premier investigating agency for terrorist cases, National Investigation Agency (NIA), claimed in 2014 in a charge-sheet that the IM was already an al-Qaeda affiliate.<sup>83</sup>

There are reasons to believe that these reports are credible. Several IM cadres have admitted to receiving training in Pakistan. In October 2008, five men from Kerala were killed in two encounters with Indian army in Kupwara, Kashmir; they were trying to cross over to Pakistan. Their leader, T Nazir, later admitted that he was sending the men to Pakistan for training. Several IM leaders operate from their safe hideouts in Pakistan.

The IM leaders, including Yasin Bhatkal, have given details of their operations in Pakistan and the support they have from the army. Based on the analysis of online communication between Riyaz Bhatkal and al-Qaeda leaders, the NIA charge-sheet “established... that Riyaz Bhatkal travelled to the tribal belts... for establishing contacts with Al Qaida. After the meeting which was very fruitful, the Al Qaida gave specific tasks

to the IM for execution and also agreed to train their cadres in terrorist activities”.<sup>84</sup>

However brief, the above details point to the nature and extent of alliance shared by al-Qaeda with various Indian and India-centric terrorists groups.

What deserves closer examination is how significant could the influence of a resurgent al-Qaeda be on groups like IM, Hizb-ul Mujahideen and Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI). These groups have been singled out for closer scrutiny mainly because of their predominant role in carrying out attacks against India since the early 1990s. This can be tested on two grounds, if any: intent and past associations.

### *Al-Qaeda and Indian Groups*

Examining past associations between al-Qaeda and these groups could be instructive. Both JeM and LeT, which had considerable success in recruiting and training recruits from India and the Indian Diaspora in the Middle East, have had a nebulous relationship with al-Qaeda. The LeT's training modules and indoctrination camps had al-Qaeda footprint. The JeM was a splinter group of HuM, a close ally of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. The HuM chief Fazlur Rahman Khalil was one of the original signatories to the February 1998 fatwa issued by bin Laden against the US.

While JeM managed to create a network of cadres and supporters in Kashmir and other parts of India in 2000 and afterwards, LeT's attempts to find a foothold have been less successful. The LeT, however has developed pockets of support and influence in Kupwara forests and Gool Gulabgarh area, near Udhampur, which could be utilised to renew terrorist violence in Kashmir in the coming years. Both groups have been

successful in executing terrorist attacks in India with the help of their Indian affiliates. Though much of this support network has been neutralised by the Indian security forces over the recent years, new groups and alliances keep emerging from the remnants of these groups.

The changing political and religious situation in Kashmir in recent times could however alter this. Decades of insurgency and the failure of political leadership to infuse any sense of confidence and hope among the people of Kashmir have given way to the increasing adoption of a strident variant of Deobandi ideology, instead of the traditional Sufi traditions which the region was known for. The radicalisation of the youth is also visible.

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan is viewed in the Kashmir Valley as a defeat for the US and victory for jihad and this could “bolster credibility and support for militant action within Kashmir”.<sup>85</sup>

There is already a spike in violence in the Valley, indicating the involvement of greater number of youth participating in such activities. A similar change was noticed in the late 1990s when the Kashmiri militancy was usurped by Pakistan-based groups like LeT. An Indian Army report, quoted in the media, said about 70 young men, most of them with educational qualifications and jobs, had joined the insurgency in 2014.<sup>86</sup> These numbers could be exaggerated but the underlining apprehension cannot be discounted.

### *SIMI and Indian Mujabideen*

Two new groups are of significance to this analysis: IM and SIMI. The IM came to be known with the serial blasts of 2008 and the emails sent to the media after every blast. Most of the terrorist attack in the 1990s as well as



in the past two decades could be traced to these cadres. However, none of these attacks showed any direct involvement of al-Qaeda.

There is, however, some evidence of affinity to al-Qaeda ideology among the Indian terrorist groups. Going by the statements made by several arrested IM leaders, many of whom were members of SIMI, sympathy for *jihad*, caliphate and al-Qaeda among them was noticeable. SIMI, a student movement which began in the Aligarh Muslim University campus to counter the growth of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), attracted a large number of cadres from different parts of the country which, at one point of time, totaled more than 10,000.

Groups like JeM and LeT have had past success in recruiting members of SIMI to their cause. Several IM leaders and cadres have SIMI background. There are reports of splinter groups of SIMI working in tandem with HuJI and other terrorist groups active within the country as well as in the immediate neighbourhood. There are, likewise, statements by IM leaders which indicated an urge to ally with al-Qaeda and other global terrorist groups to achieve greater traction for their goals in India.

### ***Eastern Pivot***

In the above context, al-Qaeda's eastern pivot needs to be studied carefully. Going by Zawahiri<sup>87</sup> and Ustad Umar's statements, two countries which are on the target list of the group include Bangladesh and Myanmar. Al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups like LeT have been trying to find a perch in Myanmar where Rohingya Muslims are under threat from Buddhists. Rohingya cadres were part of the Afghan *Mujabideen* under the umbrella of HuJI. In fact, several HuJI Rohingya members, after the Afghan *Jihad*, had settled down in Pakistan's Karachi district while others found refuge in Bangladesh.

The situation in Bangladesh needs closer attention. The Muslim nation, on India's eastern flank, is home to a host of terrorist and extremist organisations, many of them with old ties to al-Qaeda. Groups like Jamaat-ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) have had support from political parties as well as security forces. Extremist groups like Hizb-ut Tahrir are poisoning the minds of the youth. New terrorist groups like Ansarul Bangla Team and Hizb-ut Tawhid have come up recently and are eager to join either ISIS or al-Qaeda. Several Bangladeshis are part of ISIS in Syria. Political instability has sharpened the religious divide between the right-wing Islamic groups like Jamat-e-Islami and liberal political parties like Awami League. There is also, worryingly, increasing radicalism in the country as evident from the targeting of secular writers and critics of religious extremism. The killing of Ananta Bijoy Das in May 2015 was the most recent incident in what is becoming a worrying trend in Bangladesh.

The volatile situation as it exists today in Bangladesh presents al-Qaeda with an opportunity to expand its support base beyond Pakistan. The plans of HuJI's Bangladesh (HuJI-B) chapter to merge with AQIS highlights this emerging threat. The arrest of the alleged members of HuJI-B in July 2015 revealed plans of a series of joint attacks to be undertaken by the two groups.<sup>88</sup> This could help al-Qaeda to overcome its failure to find a perch in India despite consistent efforts.

Not that al-Qaeda has given up on India. Illustrative of the al-Qaeda plan is the Burdwan (West Bengal, India) incident<sup>89</sup> in October 2014, in which an accidental blast blew the lid on a major JMB operation to launch terrorist attacks in Bangladesh. Investigations revealed the presence of rudimentary training camps in West Bengal where men and women were being trained to make bombs and carry out subversive activities. The discovery of al-Qaeda literature and other evidence lend weight to the

possibility of al-Qaeda's renewed focus on Bangladesh as a staging ground for *jihad*.

The presence of Indians in ISIS raise a similar concern. But considering the number of ISIS cadres drawn from countries like UK, France and Australia, the cadres from the third largest Muslim country in the world (180 million) are negligible in numbers. But the possibility of threat even from these smaller number of Indian ISIS members needs careful attention.

These developments highlight the potential for the expansion of ISIS footprints and the possible future trajectory of AQIS, notwithstanding its major leadership attrition,<sup>90</sup> in South Asia.

## Conclusion

Al-Qaeda's ability to transform itself into a decentralised organisation—content to serve as a vanguard for the *jihadist* ideology and operate through its local affiliates in South Asia—cannot be underestimated. This has been responsible for its continued resilience. This mode of operation has clearly shown that al-Qaeda does not need to execute violent attacks itself in order to be dangerous and can continue to be a potent threat even by deferring the bulk of fighting to local groups.<sup>91</sup> Thus it is fair to assume that even in the future, al-Qaeda is likely to follow a similar pattern of operation and any resurgence of the organisation in South Asia in the future will not necessarily witness the emergence of a new al-Qaeda-like organisation but more a coming together of various extremist and insurgent groups with shared ideological, operational and political goals. It could be a sprawling network of terror with known groups and anonymous individuals spearheading the call for global *jihad*.

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